



AHP 65 features articles about Mongghul (Tu) agricultural transitions, a 'big' Reb gong incense offering, the Ganden offering of the 25th day in Reb gong, a case study of Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan, and Tibetan female workers; a policy brief on promoting equitable and quality compulsory education in China; a critical literature review of human capital theory and occupational realities of college graduates from Dzorge County, China; film and audio alerts; original short stories; memories; and a book review.

Articles, Alerts, Literature, Memories, Reviews 2025



# Articles, Alerts, Literature, Memories, Reviews

*Asian Highlands*

*Perspectives 65*

# 2025

## ASIAN HIGHLAND PERSPECTIVES #65

E-MAIL: [ahpjjournal@outlook.com](mailto:ahpjjournal@outlook.com)

HARDCOPY:

<https://www.lulu.com/spotlight/asianhighlandsperspectives>

ONLINE:

<https://archive.org/details/asianhighlandsperspectives>

ISSN (print): 1835-7741

ISSN (electronic): 1925-6329

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008944256

CALL NUMBER: DS1.A4739

SUBJECTS: Uplands-Asia-Periodicals, Tibet, Plateau of-Periodicals

All images contained herein are subject to a Creative Commons, Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License. You are free to quote, copy, and distribute these works for non-commercial purposes so long as appropriate attribution is given. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/us/deed.en>

CITATION: Articles, Alerts, Literature, Memories, Reviews. 2025. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65.

COVERS: Photos by Wen Yingxian 文英先 during the Caibaoshen 财宝神 performance/ritual in Wenjia 文家 Village, Zhongchuan 中川 Township, Minhe 民和 Hui 回 and Tu 土 Autonomous County, Haidong 海东 City, Qinghai 青海 Province in 2025.



## EDITORS

Tshe dbang rdo rje ཚེ་དབང་རྡོ་རྗེ། and Rin chen rdo rje རིན་ཆེན་རྡོ་རྗེ།

## EDITORIAL BOARD

Barbara Brower Portland State University

Caihuan Duoje (Caihua Dorji; Tshe dpal rdo rje ཚེ་དཔལ་རྡོ་རྗེ།)  
University of Canterbury

Daniel Miller USAID

Duoje Zhaxi (Dorje Tashi, Rdo rje bkra shis རྡོ་རྗེ་བཀྲ་ཤིས།) University  
of Colorado

Fernanda Pirie University of Oxford

Gengqiu Gelai (Konchok Gelek, Dkon mchog dge legs དཀོན་མཆོག་དཀེེ་  
ལེགས།) University of Zurich

Huadan Zhaxi (Dpal ldan bkra shis དཔལ་ལྷན་བཀྲ་ཤིས།) Humboldt-  
Universität zu Berlin

Jermay Jamsu ('Gyur med rgya mtsho འབྲུར་མེད་རྒྱ་མཚོ།)

Juha Janhunen University of Helsinki

Keith Dede Lewis and Clark College

Kelsang Norbu (Gesang Nuobu, Skal bzang nor bu ཀླུ་འཕགས་ནོར་བུ།)

Kunchok Benzhou ('Bum phrug འབྲུག་བླུག་) London School of  
Economics and Political Science

Lhamodrolma (Lha mo sgrol ma ལྷ་མོ་སྒྲོལ་མ།)

Mark Bender Ohio State University

Renqingka (Rin chen mkhar རིན་ཆེན་མཁར།) University of  
Massachusetts, Amherst

Rigdrol Golok (Rouzhuo; Rig grol རིག་གྲོ།) Victoria University,  
Australia

Shamo Thar (Sha mo thar ཤ་མོ་ཐར།) University of Massachusetts,  
Amherst

Toni Huber Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Veronika Zikmundova Charles University

# CONTENTS

A R T I C L E S	MONGGHUL AGRICULTURAL TRANSITIONS (1880s-2017): THE CASE OF TUGHUAN VILLAGE: HUZHU TU (MONGGHUL) AUTONOMOUS COUNTY, QINGHAI PROVINCE, PR CHINA Limusishiden (Li Dechun 李得春) and Li Mengsuo 李梦索	10
	THE LNGA BA'I BZHI RGYAL 'BIG BSANG OFFERING' IN SGRO RONG BO TIBETAN COMMUNITY, REB GONG, MTSO SNGON (QINGHAI) PROVINCE, PR CHINA Lhun 'grub ལུན་འགུབ།	54
	LNGA MCHOD 'GANDEN OFFERING OF THE TWENTY-FIFTH DAY' IN MDO BA (DUOWA), THUN RIN (REB GONG, TONGREN) CITY, MTHO SNGON (QINGHAI) PROVINCE, PR CHINA Pad+ma rig 'dzin པད་མ་རིག་འཛིན། (Wanmerenzeng 完么仁增)	76
	LINGUISTIC CORPUS DESIGN AS NEGOTIATION: A CASE STUDY OF KAZAKHSTANI GANSU DUNGAN Sami Honkasalo, Ular Nurlan, and Zhamilya Abik	106
	AMDO TIBETAN FEMALE WORKERS IN GSHONG YUL COMMUNITY: LIVES AND MIGRANT LABOR Bsod nams sgrol ma བསོད་ནམས་སྒྲོལ་མ། (Suonan Zhuoma 索南卓玛)	135
	PROMOTING EQUITABLE AND QUALITY COMPULSORY EDUCATION IN PR CHINA Mkha' 'gro tshe ring མཁའ་འགྲོ་ཚེ་རིང་། (Kangzuo Zeren 抗作泽仁)	212



C L R R I E I T V I T E I R E C A W A T L U R E	HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY AND OCCUPATIONAL REALITIES OF COLLEGE GRADUATES FROM DZORGE COUNTY, PR CHINA Mkha' 'gro tshe ring མཁའ་འགྲོ་ཚེ་རིང་། (Kangzuo Zeren 抗作泽仁)	225
F I L M A N D A U D I O A L E R T S	DON RIN NYIN དོན་རིན་ཉིན་ TIBETAN VILLAGE'S LAB TSE RITUAL Bde skyid sgrol ma བདེ་སྦྱིང་སྒྲོལ་མ། (Dejizhuoma 德吉卓玛)	248
	COLLECTING YAK HAIR IN YUL SHUL (YUSHU) TIBETAN AUTONOMOUS PREFECTURE, MTSO SNGON (QINGHAI) PROVINCE, PR CHINA Bkra shis rab rgyas བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ། (Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰)	252
	AN A MDO TIBETAN PASTORAL FAMILY'S ONE MILLION WATER OFFERING Bkra shis rgya mtsho བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措)	254
	YAK LIVES ON THE MOUNTAINS Bkra shis rab rgyas བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ། (Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰)	257
	TIBETAN SRUNG RTAGS AND YAK PARASITE TREATMENT Gser mo mtho གཤེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)	258
	TAYINSUUNI DANGMANI HGAIJA DA QINSANGNI NANTARI Limusishiden (Li Dechun 李得春)	261
	KHRO GRYAL, TIBETAN TRADITIONAL SINGER Gser mo mtsho གཤེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)	262

F I L M A N D A U D I O A L E R T S	A TIBETAN DOCTOR COLLECTS MEDICINAL HERBS IN MTSHO LHO, A MDO Bkra shis rgya mtsho བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རྒྱལ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措)	264
	OFFERING ROAST BARLEY FLOUR TO ANTS ON THE MOUNTAIN Bkra shis rgya mtsho བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རྒྱལ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措)	277
	SHEEP SHEARING 2023 IN RGYAB LUNG (JIALONG) COMMUNITY, RTA NAG MA (HEIMAHE) TOWNSHIP TOWN, GSER CHEN (GONGHE) COUNTY, MTSHO LHO (HAINAN) TIBETAN AUTONOMOUS PREFECTURE, MTSHO SNGON (QINGHAI) PROVINCE, PR CHINA Sgrol ma yag སྒྲོལ་མ་ཡག་ (zhuo ma you 卓玛优)	286
	A MDO TIBETAN MILKING, CHURNING BUTTER, AND WEAVING Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)	291
	GRANDMA'S (DKAR MO RGYAL, B. 1937) TIBETAN SNUFF Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)	293
	MOM'S TIBETAN CAKES – HOMEMADE DELIGHTS Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)	295
	THE FIRST DAY OF THE TIBETAN NEW YEAR (2025): MTSHAMS THOG GONG MA MONASTERY Sngags sa khon thar rgyal སྤགས་ས་ཁོན་ཐར་རྒྱལ། (Ehesa Kantaijia 俄合萨侃太加)	297



	YAK PARASITE INJECTABLES: BDE SKYID (XINGFU), MGO MANG (GUOMAYING) TOWNSHIP, MANG RDZONG (GUINAN) COUNTY, MSTHO LHO (HAINAN) TIBETAN AUTONOMOUS PREFECTURE, MSTHO SNGON (QINGHAI) PROVINCE, PR CHINA Gser mo mtho གཤེར་མོ་མཐོ་ (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)	301
	MAKING GRO KHRA BREAD FOR TIBETAN NEW YEAR (2024): 'BA' DGON TOWNSHIP, CHU DMAR LEG COUNTY, MTSO SNGON PROVINCE, PR CHINA Bkra shis rab rgyas (Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰)	303
L I T E R A T U R E	TRAVEL FROM YUL SHUL (YUSHU) AND FIRST URBAN EMPLOYMENT IN SOUTH CHINA 'Dan ma bkra shis rab rgyas འདན་མ་བཟ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ། (Daima Zhaxirangjie 戴玛扎西让杰)	305
	TATTOOED Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྱིན་ལས། (Gerichengli 格日成立)	323
	NEW NEIGHBORS Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྱིན་ལས། (Gerichengli 格日成立)	330
	WHITE SPOT Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྱིན་ལས། (Gerichengli 格日成立)	334
	COLLECTING DEBTS Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྱིན་ལས། (Gerichengli 格日成立)	340
	YOLO Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྱིན་ལས། (Gerichengli 格日成立)	349
	PUMMELED BY SLEET Mda' mo dhon grup rdo rje མདའ་མོ་དོན་གྲུབ་རྩོམ་ཞེ། (Dongzhuduojie 东主多杰)	355
	PANDEMIC SPRING Dbyangs can skyid དབྱངས་ཅན་སྒྱེད། (Yangjijie 羊吉姐)	359
	A BLOODY ELBOW Thub bstan 'jig med rnam rgyal ཐུབ་བསྟན་འཇིག་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ། (Tuodanjiumainan jie 托旦久买南杰)	362

	<b>HENOCH SCHONLEIN PURPURAC</b> Thub bstan 'jig med rnam rgyal ཐུབ་བསྟན་འཇིག་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ། (Tuodanjiumainanjie 托旦久买南杰)	365
	<b>BRAG DKAR PASTORAL CHILDHOOD AND A MYE RMA CHEN PILGRIMAGE (2009)</b> Dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐུབས། (Guanquijie 官却杰)	368
	<b>A REB GONG (TONGREN) VISIT AND KLU ROL</b> Dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐུབས། (Guanquijie 官却杰)	382
M	<b>DBANG CHEN TSHE RING</b> དབང་ཆེན་ཚེ་རིང་། (Angqingcairang 昂青才让)	385
	1: Travel to Lha sa	385
E	2: Skipping School	386
	3: Brave Dog	387
	4: Mother's Gift	387
M	5: Earning Money	388
	<b>G.YANG DKAR SGROL MA</b> གཡང་དཀར་སྒྲོལ་མ། (Yanggezhuoma 羊格卓玛)	389
O	1: The Day My Donkeys Left	389
	2: Leaving Life to Dry	390
	3: Spilled Soup	390
R	4: A Calf Scare	392
	5: A Transformative Kick	392
	<b>LCAGS MTSO RGYAL</b> ལྷགས་མཚོ་རྒྱལ། (Jicuoqia 吉措加)	394
I	1: 2021 Earthquake Night	394
	2: Lesson in Lying	394
	3: A Bloody Tumble	395
E	4: Child Wedding	395
	5: Anticipating Lo sar	396
S	<b>BKRA SHIS RGYA MTSO</b> བར་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措)	397
	1: Tree Planting	397
	2: Banditry	398



M E M O R I E S	3: Death of a Yak	399
	4: Horse with a Broken Leg	400
	5: Meatless Bones	400
	BDE SKYID SGROL MA བདེ་སྒྱེད་སྒྲོལ་མ། (Dejizhuoma 德吉卓玛)	402
	1: Kidnappers	402
	2: School Phobia	404
	3: Special Teacher, Special Rewards	405
	4: A New Year Accident	406
	5: First Salary	407
	THUB BSTAN 'JIG MED RNAM RGYAL ཐུབ་བསྟན་འཛིན་ མེད་རྒྱལ་ལྷ་མོ། (Tuodanjiumainan jie 托旦久买南杰)	409
	1: Doctoring a Bird	409
	2: A Dog and Firecrackers	409
	3: Grandmother, Where Are You?	410
	4: A Five-Stitch Slide	410
	5: Bottle Collecting for Candy	411
	DBYANGS CAN SKYID དབྱངས་ཅན་སྒྱེད་ (Yangjijie 羊吉姐)	412
	1: Broken Pencil Tip	412
	2: Bright Moon	412
	3: Watchful Wolf	414
	4: My Favorite Yak	414
	5: Grandfather's Radio	415
S	DKON MCHOG SKYABS དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐུབ་མ། (Guanquejie 官却杰)	416
	1: Leisure	416
	2: Lamb's Mother	416
	3: In Flames	417
	4: Livestock Cross a River	418
	5: A Lethal Fall	418
	KONCHOK PAL, DKON MCHOK DPAL རྒྱལ་མཚོ་ཕལ་ལྷ་མོ། (Gongquehua 公却华)	420
	1: <i>Mna'ya</i> - Sworn Brothers	420
	2: School Discipline and Class Points	421

M E M O R I E S	3: Stealing School Canteen Beef	424
	4: Over The Mountain for a Glimpse of TV	425
	5: My Old Horse	427
	6: My Small Horse	428
	MDA' MO DHON GRUP RDO RJE མདའ་མོ་དོན་གྲུབ་རྩོམ་ཞེ། (Dongzhuduojie 东主多杰)	431
	1: First Day of School	431
	2: Jo khang Pilgrimage	431
	3: Moving to Summer Pasture	432
	4: Healed	433
	5: Pilgrimage With Mother	433
BOOK REVIEW	DAM CHOS NYI MA དམ་ཚུལ་ཉི་མ། (Dangqiunima 当求尼玛)	435
	1: Best Childhood Friend	435
	2: Early Childhood Memory	435
	3: Illness	436
	4: Hand Sniffing	437
	5: Joy	437
BOOK REVIEW	REVIEW: KUANG BIAO 'THE KNOCKOUT' BY ZHU JUNYI AND XU JIZHOU Reviewed by Wu Jing 吴晶 and Ye Boyu 叶伯钰	439



MONGGHUL AGRICULTURAL TRANSITIONS  
(1880s-2017): THE CASE OF TUGHUAN  
VILLAGE: HUZHU TU (MONGGHUL)  
AUTONOMOUS COUNTY, QINGHAI  
PROVINCE, PR CHINA<sup>1</sup>

Limusishiden (Li Dechun 李得春), Joint Surgery Department,  
Qinghai University Affiliated Hospital, and Li Mengsuo 李梦索  
College of Finance and Economics, Qinghai University

ABSTRACT

Limuzhunmaa (b. 1942) describes farming in Tughuan (Tuguan) Village, Danma Town, Huzhu Tu (Mongghul) Autonomous County, Haidong City, Qinghai Province, PR China. Farming history; names of ancestral farm fields and their size; changes in field control and use during the Tudi Gaige 'Land Reform' movement in 1952; and changes in 1983 and later stipulated by the Jiating Lianchan Chengbao Zerenzhi 'Land Contract with Individuals' policy. Small *suuqang* 'garden plots' in each Mongghul household are also described, and Mongghul terms related to agriculture are provided.

KEYWORDS

Mongghul agriculture, fertilizer, land ownership, Qinghai, Huzhu

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on interviews with Limuzhunmaa (b. 1942; illiterate)<sup>2</sup> about farming and land ownership at his Tughuan Village home in February 2017. An audio recorder was used

---

<sup>1</sup> Limusishiden (Li Dechun 李得春) and Li Mengsuo 李梦索. 2024. Mongghul Agricultural Transitions (1880s-2017): The Case of Tughuan Village: Huzhu Tu (Mongghul) Autonomous County, Qinghai Province, PR China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:10-54.

<sup>2</sup> See FIG 1. in the Appendix for a list of people mentioned in this article.

during interviews. The recordings were later consulted when writing this article, mostly in the first person. The introduction and footnotes clarify certain terms and local concepts. The article concentrates on the experience of Tughuan Village by examining private land ownership before Liberation in 1949, farmland confiscation and redistribution to landless peasants in 1952 during the Land Reform Movement,<sup>1</sup> the Land Contract Policy with Individuals in 1983 when fields were distributed to individuals, and an overview of farming in 2017. The focus is on Tughuan Village throughout. This is the first in-depth, social-historical study in English of agriculture practiced by a Mongghul village in Huzhu County.

#### LOCATION AND CLIMATE

Huzhu County is located between north latitude 36°30'-37°09' and east longitude 101°46'-102°45'. To the north are the Daban Mountains of the Qilian Mountain range and neighboring Menyuan Hui Autonomous County, Haibei Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Bordering Huzhu to the northeast are Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County and Yongdeng County, Gansu Province. Bordering Huzhu to the southeast is Ledu Region, Haidong City; to the south is Ping'an Region, Haidong City; to the west is Datong Hui and Tu Autonomous County; and to the southwest is Xining City.

Huzhu County is located south of the eastern section of the Qilian Mountain range, between the Loess Plateau and the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. The terrain is higher in the north and lower in the south, with the Daban Mountains running from northwest to southeast within the county's territory. With an average elevation of 2,700 meters, the county reaches 4,200 meters at its highest point and is 2,100 meters above sea level at its lowest. The county has a continental climate with a dry, windy spring, cool summers, and rainy autumns. Winter is cold with

---

<sup>1</sup> See FIG 2 for a list of government policies/initiatives.

little snow. The annual average temperature is 3.4°C.<sup>1</sup>

Tughuan Village is located at the foot of the Chileb (Longwang Mountains)<sup>2</sup> and is one of the most level places in Danma Town. Village farmland is on the slopes of a hill east of the village, and level land is on the village's west, south, and north sides. All villagers have the same ancestry and surname, Li. Tughuan Village residents originally came from a community with the same name in Wushi Town.

The Pingda<sup>3</sup> motorway passes south of the village, and Danma Road passes to the west. Liujia Village is to the north, and Pudang and Slidii villages are south of the village. The average elevation in Tughuan Village is 2,400 meters above sea level.

## HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE IN HUZHU COUNTY

Liu et al. (2010:426) reported that carbonized crops unearthed at Kayue (1600-600 cal BP, Ma et al. 2013:2) cultural sites in Fengtai, Weiyuan Town, Huzhu County consisted of ninety-two percent naked barley, five percent millet, and three percent wheat, testifying to the long history of agriculture in Huzhu County.

Observations provided by Schram (2006 [1954-1961]:248-250) offer a brief description of farming among the Mongghul based on historical records and his observations from having "lived as a missionary in the frontier region of Hsining [Xining] in Northwest China" (23) from 1911 to 1922.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Yan and Wang (1993:1) were consulted for information regarding location and climate.

<sup>2</sup> Located in north Huzhu County, the main peak has an altitude of 4,245 meters.

<sup>3</sup> "Ping" refers to "Ping'an Region" and "da" refers to Datong County.

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous (1993:123-131) records the amount of farmland in Huzhu (e.g., 77,432 hectares in 1949) and, particularly after 1949, crop rotation schemes (including allowing fields to lie fallow), use of chemical fertilizers, and lists of native and introduced varieties of wheat, barley, broad bean, peas, potatoes, and oil-bearing crops.

## LOCAL LAND OWNERSHIP HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

Many years ago, who knows in what year, maybe in the mid-nineteenth century, there were few people in Tughuan Village. Robbers roamed the land, rebellions were common, and ferocious wolves roamed Tughuan Village and surrounding areas. For the sake of security and to strengthen our village, our ancestors met and took gifts of liquor and bread to Liujia Village, where they implored a household with the Lu surname to move into TVDT.<sup>2</sup> Liujia Village was larger than our village in size and population. Additionally, the Lu household, located in the southern part of Liujia Village, was very near our village. TVDT residents were in frequent contact, which is why they were asked to resettle in our village. In return, TVDT promised to give cultivated land and allow them to open large tracts of uncultivated land in our village territory. A promise was made to treat the Lu Family as *warishdang* 'clan members'. Tughuan had only one clan at that time.

The Lu family members agreed, moved to Tughuan Village, and built their courtyard compound at the center of today's Tughuan Village (the threshing ground) on our ancestral family's field. Tughuan villagers contributed labor, timber, and so on. They also gave them fields and permitted them to cultivate as much new land as they wanted. In the following years, the Lu Family cultivated a great deal of new land in Tughuan Village territory to enrich their family estate and lives, became clan members, and lived with Tughuan residents.

A large amount of land newly cultivated by the Lu Family was on slopes east of the village. During those turbulent times, people from elsewhere who wanted to move into Tughuan Village were accepted and given fields.

Later during rebellions, Tughuan residents fled to their ancestral homeland in TVWT, and Lu Family members returned to their original area in the upper village - Liujia. Once life calmed, Tughuan residents returned to Tughuan Village in Danma Town, and Lu Family members returned to live in TVDT, where they rebuilt destroyed compounds and constructed houses.

---

<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent accounts are by Limuzhunmaa, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Abbreviations: TVDT = Tughuan Village, Danma Town, TVWT = Tughuan Village, Wushi Town.

Fleeing from Tughuan Village and returning later because of rebellions repeated itself several times. However, the last time in the 1870s, the Lu Family fled and stayed in Liujia (as of 2018).

The last two Lu Family compounds in TVDT were leveled in the 1960s. Lu Family members are still called "Tughuan" by Liujia villagers since they once lived in Tughuan Village.

## FAMILY FIELDS

My family owned several fields in TVDT before 1949:

- Foori Ghajari 'Grave Land' was named this because it is where my ancestors' graves are. It was about twelve *shangzi*<sup>1</sup> in size and located at the foot of the hill south of the village along the Pingda motorway that passes through Weiyuan.
- Mughuagang Ghajari 'Mughua Hilltop Lands'. Three fields were located east of Tughuan Village. One was about ten *shangzi* in size, another was about five *shangzi*, and the third was about twelve *shangzi* in size. Narrow slopes separated these three fields.
- Qangxa Ghajari 'Qangxa Land'. This field below Mughua Hilltop was called Qangxa and was about six *shangzi* in size.
- Suurishidi<sup>2</sup> Land 'Suurishidi Ghajari' was a Y-shaped field eleven *shangzi* in size located atop a hill north of Mughua Hilltop.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Shangzi* refers to a variable volume unit used as a grain container and to measure grain. *Shangzi* containers were trapezoid-shaped. The top of the container was square and had no cover. The base was smaller than the top. There were three *shangzi*: the *shge shangzi* 'big *shangzi*' held 7.5 kilos of grain, had a base perimeter of about 120 centimeters, and a height of around thirty centimeters. The *mula shangzi* 'small *shangzi*' held five kilos of grain, had a base perimeter of eighty centimeters, and a height of twenty centimeters. The *goai* held a half kilogram. Ten *shangzi* was one *dou*. In spring, one *mu* of farmland required about 2.5 *shangzi* of seed for planting; consequently, the farmland area was described using the amount of seed needed for planting. (One *mu* equals ten *fen*. One *mu* = 666.6 square meters, 0.067 hectares, or 0.16 acres).

<sup>2</sup> According to the instructions of a Living Buddha or a *purghan* 'sedaned or pole deity', a *suurishidi* might have been built at the



- Hanasigha Ghajari 'Eyebrow Land' was eleven *shangzi* in size. It consisted of three triangular-shaped fields north of Suurishidi. The upper two small pieces of land resembled human eyebrows in shape. The larger field was located beneath the two smaller fields, hence the name "Eyebrow Land."
- Danglangang Ghajari 'Danglan Hilltop Land'. Danglangang 'hilltop' was located on the north side of Mughua Hilltop. The east side of Danglan Hilltop is in Fulaan Nara's territory.<sup>1</sup> My family owned three connected fields. One was ten *shangzi* in size, and the other two were six *shangzi* in size. People from Tughuan and surrounding areas often burned juniper branches and roasted highland barley flour and conducted rituals involving sacrificing sheep atop Danglan Hilltop.
- Xrajin Ghajari 'Xrajin Land' was about six *shangzi* in size and located below Danglan Hilltop on the north side of Xrajin Ravine.
- Maxuu Ghajari 'Ladle Land' was about six *shangzi* in size and near Xrajin Land. It was located on the shady side of Xrajin Ravine and was shaped like a ladle, hence the name.
- Jadunbulog Land 'Jadunbulog Ghajari' was about fourteen *shangzi* in size. It was divided and assigned to five families after the Household Responsibility System was implemented in 1983. Jadunbulog refers to a small hilltop north of Tughuan Village where villagers burned incense and prostrated to Shge Tingere 'Great Heaven' because it was very near village households.

---

center of a designated slope to prevent hailstorms and disease. This adobe bricks or soil pyramidal structure was about two meters high and four meters diagonally across. It was not circumambulated, and precious objects such as clay Buddha images and juniper branches were not placed inside. Usually, the entire village cooperated in building suurishidi (Limusishiden 2015:57).

<sup>1</sup> Mongghul in the Huzhu area were historically divided into Haliqi (meaning unknown) and Fulaan Nara 'Red Sun'. In 2017, Haliqi included Danma, Donggou, Weiyuan, Taizi, and Dongshan townships. Fulaan Nara referred to Wushi, Songduo, and Hongyazigou townships (in Huzhu County) and Shdara Township (in Ledu Region). Fulaan Nara was located northeast of the Dongyuan Mountains. Haliqi was southwest of the same mountains. Fulaan Nara residents referred to themselves as Karilang, while Haliqi residents referred to themselves as Mongghul (Limusishiden and Jugui 2010:42).

- Shdiriga Huinagu Ghajari 'Behind Threshing Ground Land' was about twelve *shangzi* in size and north of Tughuan Village.
- Shdiriga<sup>1</sup> Ghajari 'Threshing Ground Land' was about twenty *shangzi* in size and located at the center of Tughuan Village. Its level location explains why it was utilized as a threshing ground. The main entrance in the north of the village was also here. Originally belonging to the Lu Family in Liujia Village (mentioned above), Tala Land was given to Liujia Village in exchange for Threshing Ground Land in about the 1960s. (Later, why the Lu Family came to occupy land in Tughuan is explained.)
- Tala Ghajari 'Plain Land' (1)' was about twenty-two *shangzi* in size and located at the main entrance in the north of the village. When I was very young, two household compounds were built on the Threshing Ground Land that had belonged to the Lu Family in Liujia Village. Tughuan villagers leveled the two courtyard compounds and used the area as fields during the production team period in the 1960s.
- 'Tala Ghajari 'Plain Land' (2) was about twenty *shangzi* in size and was also at the village's main entrance.
- Ger Huinagu Ghajari 'Behind Courtyards Land' was about fourteen *shangzi* in size and situated on the hill slopes east of the village.
- Shge Kizuu Land 'Big Piece' was about twenty *shangzi* in size and located on the hill's upper slope.

The above fields totaled about ninety *mu* before 1949.

## FARMING SCHEDULES

The Mongghul area is at a high altitude, has a cold climate, and crop yields are relatively low. Mongghul farmers in the highest areas never grew the same crop on the same field for two consecutive years. Instead, they tried to leave fields completely *xiitila* 'fallow' for a year after they had been cultivated. Fields cultivated two years in a row had very low yields.

As I have described, my family had large agricultural fields. Half were sown, while the other half lay fallow. The fallow land was plowed twice a year and sometimes three times. After plowing and seeding, men plowed fallow

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Threshing ground'.

fields. A second plowing followed when weeds sprouted around the fifth lunar month's fifth day. A third plowing was done in the late eighth or early ninth months. Men plowed with cattle, mules, and horses.

Fallow fields had good yields the following year if there were no hailstorms, drought, or heavy rain. A common saying was:

*Ula ghajarini kun xiitilaji zhuangja awunii, texjin ghajarini kun szu sulaji zhuangja awunii.* Mongghul are highlanders and get good harvests from fallow fields, while lowlanders irrigate their fields.

Plowing and sowing began on an auspicious day designated by a *purghan* in a household or a village. On the day designated by the *purghan*, all adults and some older children dressed in their best clothes and went to one of their fields to plow with a pair of oxen, horses, or mules. The family head plowed a furrow in a large circle at the center of the field and then made a cross within the circle. Afterward, participants walked into the center of the circle and knelt in rows, facing the heads of the oxen. The direction the oxen faced was designated by *purghan*. According to the *purghan*'s forecast, happiness, good harvest, and prosperity were expected to emanate during the year from this direction, which might have varied from year to year.

A big incense offering was offered in the circle. The family head offered a large flat, circular loaf of baked bread to Xruu Aadee 'Earth God'. Family members then made three prostrations as the family head poured liquor on the ground and sprinkled liquor in all directions within the circle to please Xruu Aadee.

Next, the family head divided the bread into small pieces and distributed some to each family member and the two oxen to eat on the spot. The remaining bread was broken into crumbs and thrown onto the field as an offering to Xruu Aadee and a way of asking for a good harvest and protection against hail.

Family members, particularly male participants, drank the remaining liquor. Everyone returned home after the ceremony, except those who continued plowing and sowing after finishing the plowing ritual. The ceremony meant a bumper harvest was anticipated during the year by pleasing Great Heaven and all the deities before plowing and sowing.

Cultivated crops included *sbai* 'barley', *buudi* 'wheat', *mula pujog* 'peas', *giizi* 'rapeseed', *huma* 'hemp', *shge pujog* 'broad beans', and *sayog* 'potatoes'.

Wheat was planted when I was a child, but yields were very low because the wheat did not mature. In addition, *xiaohongmai*<sup>1</sup> had a small, short head and a narrow stem. Families mostly ate highland barley flour all year round by making bread and cooking noodles. The limited amount of *xiaohongmai* flour was used to treat guests and during annual festivals. In the early 1950s, *xiaohongmai* was replaced by high-yielding wheat varieties locally introduced by the government, for example, *galaohan*, *bai abo*, and *hong abo*, which had higher yields than highland barley. The use of modern fertilizer was another reason yields increased.

*Xiaohongmai* was cultivated in infertile fields. If planted in fertile fields, it would lodge. Highland barley was different as described in the saying:

*Sbai kidiisza joliula liulagungi yii, buudi kidiisza jang nige hayog yisi yii.* There will be scoops of highland barley grain if it lodges, but only a handful of straw if wheat does the same.

This is why highland barley was favored on fallow land.

Two different types of oats were planted every year and harvested in autumn. *Langzi* 'green dried bundled oat straw' came from oats harvested while still green. Green oats were cut with a sickle, bundled in sheaves, dried in the fields, moved to households, stored on the roof atop compound walls and inside rooms, and fed to cattle, sheep, and goats in winter. Oats that remained and ripened were harvested and threshed on the threshing ground. The grain was ground in the local water mill, and the flour was used to feed swine. Meanwhile, people cooked *jarima budaa* 'gruel' with oat flour.

Only fields that had lain fallow produced bumper harvests. Yields were good if highland barley or *xiaohongmai* were planted on fallow fields that had grown rapeseed or hemp.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Xiaohongmai* (also called *huomai* and *hongmai*), refers to an old wheat variety planted in spring. Considered an excellent cultivar in Qinghai Province in the early 1950s, it had been cultivated for more than a century in Qinghai and Gansu provinces (Yan and Wang 1994:441).

Fields were no longer allowed to lie fallow when chemical fertilizers were introduced after about 1970.

Green rapeseed sprouts were eaten raw with the addition of some salt. They were crispy and tasty.

Highland barley was planted for the first six years when new land was cultivated. Wheat was planted in the seventh year because such newly cultivated land was considered too *kuiden* 'cold' to grow wheat and had first to be loosened and warmed by the sun.

Highland barley was planted and sown before weeds sprouted. Wheat, beans, and peas were sown at the beginning of summer. Plowing and sowing lasted until the fifth day of the fifth lunar month if a family had a lot of cultivated land. Oats were sown after all the other crops had been planted.

In addition to field agriculture, there was a small *suuqang* 'garden' near the courtyard or inside the courtyard compound in each Mongghul household. Women cultivated vegetables such as *cungunog* 'green onions', *sinsog* 'garlic', *jiusai* 'leek', *huangya sai* 'Chinese cabbage', and *bosai* 'spinach' in the *suuqang*. A few *yintog* 'cherry', *lizi* 'plum', and *sbai alima* 'apricot' trees were cultivated in the *suuqang*. Fruits ripened around the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. Only the three just-mentioned fruits were cultivated and eaten by Mongghul in our area.

In the past, income could not be earned as is the case today, for example, by doing construction work, finding jobs in a restaurant as a waiter/waitress, shop assistant, and so on in cities. However, certain impoverished families sent their family members (mostly boys) to do farm work or herd livestock for families with many fields. They herded sheep, goats, and cattle, did harvest work, moved harvested crops to threshing grounds, and did various household chores. Highland barley grain, wheat grain, and straw were used to pay workers.

After crops were plowed and sown, men got up before dawn, went to the fallow fields, plowed, and then returned before the hot part of the day. After a meal, they relaxed in village lanes, chatting in shady sites with other men, gossiping, telling stories, and enjoying their lives. Those who were well-off or poor were alike and had nothing to do except relax during this leisure period. Young men wore crude ox-hide shoes and a *huuguazi* 'woolen jacket' without trousers.

When I was fourteen or fifteen, I had no trousers to wear. I had only a woolen jacket draped over my shoulders, a white *zhanmog* 'woolen hat', and *alog qanhai* 'ox-hide shoes' on my feet. At that time, everyone wore woolen clothes. Before cotton cloth appeared in Mongghul areas in the early 1950s, sheepskin clothes were worn on cold days, particularly in winter. When I was a child, peddlers from south China sold coarse cotton cloth known as *molan gidabu*<sup>1</sup> in our village lanes. The peddlers came with carts pulled by horses or on horseback. A *chp* of *molan* was exchanged for a *shangzi* of highland barley grain. *Molan* cotton cloth was blue.

## FERTILIZERS

In my childhood, there were no commercial fertilizers. Instead, *fulaan xruu* 'red soil' was burnt in fields and used as fertilizer. The burning process began in the seventh or eighth lunar months after harvest and after the land had been softened by a day or two of summer rain. Once bundles of grain crops had been moved to the family threshing ground near the households, a piece of land was selected that was often on a hill, far from the village.

Family livestock were taken to the selected land and driven back and forth, trampling the sticky earth for half a day until the soil was hard. The next day, the topsoil was dug out with spades in *dangghuali manta* 'large, rough bricks' that were put in rows in the field to dry until the next spring.

Before sowing, the bricks were arranged to create a long oven at the center of the field. The outside was plastered with mud. After incense and cypress branches were burned near the oven to please Xruu Aadee, a fire was built in the oven. After burning for about two days, the baked earth was crushed with *dangghuali tangghula* 'mallets'. Men and women carried the ashes *ruyu* 'back' to the fields, where they piled the ashes in small mounds and covered them with soil to prevent the loss of fertility. The distance between the mounds was about three meters. The mounds of ashes were scattered with a shovel before plowing and seeding.

Between 1958 and 1984, each laborer was required to produce thirty cubic meters of ashes. There were seven laborers in my family, so my family

---

<sup>1</sup> C, *gedabu*.

<sup>2</sup> One *chi* = one-third meters.

had to produce 210 cubic meters of ash. The ash was measured with a tape measure to ensure that each worker had met their quota.

Burning red soil for fertilizer was extremely difficult and required a lot of time. Carrying the burned soil into the fields in baskets caused severe bruising and made shoulders bleed.

Another traditional fertilizer was from the *tugun*<sup>1</sup> and livestock stables. The stables were cleaned every other day by women, who brought baskets of dried soil on their backs and scattered it in the stables. The animals trampled dung and urine into this earth, which was collected and dumped near the front gate, where it was collected the next year during planting time, along with ash from the *bankang*<sup>2</sup> and *pei*,<sup>3</sup> and used as fertilizer in fields near the village. The burned red soil was used in fields far from the village.

The burned red soil and collected manure were used from about 1958 to 1984. Initially, chemical fertilizer was given to farmers for use on *xiaohongmai* fields. One day, a leader surnamed Wen told us at a village gathering, "Use this new white chemical fertilizer in your wheat fields this year. It greatly increases wheat production. It has been used in south China."

We were skeptical, reasoning that fertilizer had been made for hundreds of years by burning red soil, so how could farmers increase production using this new white substance? Many did not use chemical fertilizer. However, the comparatively higher yields from using chemical fertilizer were soon obvious.

---

<sup>1</sup> The courtyard center featured a pit where livestock dung, human urine, and ash were placed. Children defecated and urinated here, but adults urinated here only at night. In the daytime, adults urinated in a toilet, usually near the front gate, inside or outside the compound. The courtyard was swept, and the dust was put in the pit. When it was full, it was dug out and used as manure. The *tugun* had completely disappeared in the Mongghul area by around the year 2000.

<sup>2</sup> A heatable adobe platform was divided into a *yikang* and *bankang*. For more detail, see Limusishiden and Jugui (2010:38).

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, Mongghul used a *pei* in the kitchen. It was divided into two parts by a *langang* 'low wall'. The first part was for cooking, and the other half was the *pei* 'raised platform' made of adobe bricks and heatable, where all the family slept and entertained guests with food, liquor, and conversation (Schram 2006 [1954-1961]:193).

## LAND AND TUGHUAN VILLAGE

My father, Limusirang (1924-1987), was sent to be the son of adoptive parents in Tughuan Village when he was seven. My father's adoptive parents had no son and doted on him. His adoptive father<sup>1</sup> had two brothers. One was a monk living in the Nanshan Mountains called Nanshan Badii (~1890-1960) 'Nanshan Monk'. One (name unknown) was an unmarried, skillful weaver and cook.

Father's adoptive parents had a biological daughter who married a man from Smee Village, Wushi Town but died early for unknown reasons. Some said Father's adoptive parents had another biological daughter who married a man in Sughuanghuali Village, Danma Town.

Nanshan Monk often stayed outside their home. Limusirang's two adoptive fathers (excluding Nanshan Monk) lived together in a courtyard compound but did not talk to each other. I never knew why.

Before Father was sent to his adoptive parents' home, his two adoptive fathers were spiritless, drifted along, and lived daily without thinking of working hard in their fields, planting trees, and making furniture because they had no son and thus no offspring. However, once my father, Limusirang, was brought to live in their home as an adoptive son as authorized by clan members in Tughuan Village, the two adoptive fathers became energetic, began working hard in their fields, planted trees, and wove *xuara* 'large woolen sheets of cloth for tents and for drying grain under the sun'. Later, they became wealthy.

Before Liberation in 1949, locals could buy and sell land freely. Those with plenty of money bought farmland to expand their family assets and enhance their social status.

Many men were gambling addicts and did little else all day. They paid their debts when they lost, using their families' furniture, livestock, fields, and even wives. Poor families with no cash for urgent needs sold their fields to generate cash. Land prices varied according to the field location. For example, the price of a field in a plain area was higher than a field on a high hill slope. A field's distance from the village also influenced the price. For example, a field near the village was more expensive than one that was not nearby.

---

<sup>1</sup> His name, and birth and death dates are unknown.



During the Land Reform Movement in 1952, my family was assigned to the Funong 'Rich Peasant' category. The Advanced Agricultural Cooperative Team<sup>1</sup> was implemented in 1956, making private land public property. In 1958, all village residents were ordered to eat together in Srangdanzhu's home in our village.

In 1962 or 1963, every household was assigned three *fen* of land for private use. Three *fen* of land for private use were assigned three different times. Later, every household received a seven-*fen* plot to raise swine privately.

Some Tughuan Village fields were assigned to Pudang Village because Tughuan and Pudang were both parts of the same production team. Furthermore, during the Siqingyundong "Four Clean-ups Movement"<sup>2</sup> from 1963 to 1966, some Tughuan Village fields were permanently assigned to Slidii Village because Tughuan and Slidii were part of the same production team.

The Household Responsibility System was implemented in 1983. At that time, I was assigned to tend livestock in our village's livestock team with my cousin, Limurinqan (1936-1990). This was during the time of fixed output quotas for each household. I herded Tughuan Village livestock in the Chileb Mountains. When I returned from the mountains during the eighth lunar month, the village land and livestock had been distributed to every village household. My family had received the best horse in the village, which delighted us. However, the fields we had been assigned were atop the hills east of our village, which meant yields were poor.

Soon, the land and livestock assignments were completed, and I was delighted again to receive the best horse. I was also glad I was assigned my family's ancestral graveyard land (Foori Ghajari), which another village family had previously cultivated. I felt lucky that I had my ancestors again. In addition, I was assigned my ancestral Qangxa land, about six *shangzi* in size. I only received these two ancestral fields.

A large piece of land near the south entrance of Tughuan Village was

---

<sup>1</sup> The Advanced Agricultural Cooperative Team was a farmer's cooperative economic organization based on the collective management of labor and land, farm animals, and farm implements.

<sup>2</sup> The Four Cleanups Movement was launched by Mao Zedong in 1963 to remove "reactionary" elements.

a wetland. Ma Bufang<sup>1</sup> (1903-1975) had it cultivated. Later, Tughuan Living Buddha bought it from Ma Bufang. During the time of the Advanced Agricultural Cooperative Team, this large, level field was assigned to Shdangja Village, which was opposite Tughuan Village.

## MOJIA<sup>2</sup> LAND IN MY VILLAGE

Some land in my village was known as Mojia. I will now give an account about Mojia land and its owner:

Once Tughuan villagers moved here from Wushi Town, a huge courtyard compound was built in today's Tughuan Village with assistance from Tughuan Nangsuu<sup>3</sup> (Angsuo, Nangso). The compound had tall, thick walls to prevent invasion. The family lived together in the compound and eventually had five sons. The number of family members increased after the sons married and had children. Quarrels and conflicts arose, so the family built walls inside the compound, and each son was assigned a courtyard. Each family had its own front gate. Yangxja's<sup>4</sup> family lived in the northeast compound, Jighani (Upper) in the southeast, Duranzin in the northwest, and Durani (my ancestor) in the southwest of the compound.<sup>5</sup>

Later, five sons lived in Yangxja's compound, including Yangxja. The family head often gambled and eventually lost all his farmland, property, and

---

<sup>1</sup> A Muslim warlord in China who ruled Qinghai Province during the Republic of China period.

<sup>2</sup> Mo Family land. Mo refers to a Chinese surname. *Jia* refers to family or household. Mo bought land in Tughuan Village and moved here.

<sup>3</sup> During the Ming Dynasty (1573-1619), upper-level Tibetan religious authorities granted Mongghul the hereditary Tughuan 'internal affairs officer' position. The three *angsuo* in Huzhu were Tuhun, Xiawaer, and Zhade. Monks were eligible for this position. The three *angsuo* separately governed the contemporary Hongyazigou and Halazhigou townships, and Wushi Town. The *angsuo* system ended in 1930 when Huzhu County was established (Yan and Wang 1994:864 in Limusishiden and Stuart 2010:67).

<sup>4</sup> A son among the five in the compound courtyard. His father was the head of the compound, but I never knew his name. I also never knew the other four sons' names.

<sup>5</sup> *Durani* refers to a person, a family name, and a location.

courtyard compound to a Chinese man named Mo from today's Lazhuang Village, Danma Town. The headman was thus forced to leave with his five sons and lived as servants for a well-off family in Foori Village, in today's Wushi Town. Mo then moved into Yangxja's courtyard in Tughuan Village with his family and lived by farming Yangxja's fields that were eventually known as the Mo Family Land.

The family just mentioned had moved to Foori Village and lived very poor lives. Eventually, they moved to Xranghuali Village, located in today's Hongyazigou Township, and built a compound.

One day, Tughuan men carried the Tughuan Village *purghan* (Tughuan Nengneng<sup>1</sup>) to Xranghuali Village. The *purghan* visited the family (Yangxja) because they were Tughuan people and asked the family to give *gashiduu*<sup>2</sup> to her (the *purghan*).

The family head shouted:

*Tughuan Nengneng, bu gujaina qadigha adagu sghuudini qi nda gualanda gua. Niuduri malang bu gujaina qadigha shdagu, shdaghua yiigu sghuudini qi yang gashiduu hgilela ragungi, bu qimu ghua shdaji gua!* Tughuan Nengneng! You didn't see me when I could not fill my stomach, but when I became better off and could fill my stomach and find firewood for my family, you come to get *gashiduu* from me. I don't want to give you *gashiduu*!

Hearing this, Tughuan Nengneng turned, walked some distance away, stopped, and communicated to her retinue:

*Tehgi kile gashiduu yii ghusada ligunaji, ali sara ali durishdi teni kudu ghoori kun ranji tehgini saighangi nige dangrinla.* Please go say that it's fine if they don't want to give me *gashiduu*, but please know that two guests will visit them on a certain day in a certain month, and they must entertain them well.

The entourage was reluctant to give this message to the family. However, they did go to the home and repeated the *purghan*'s message because they worried that they would offend the *purghan* if they did not.

---

<sup>1</sup> A sedaned female *purghan* Tughuan residents venerated.

<sup>2</sup> *Gashiduu* refers to gifts of cash, rapeseed oil, wheat seeds, and butter given to *purghan*.

Later, two strangers visited the family home and were permitted to stay for the night. They stole the family's two fine mules late that night. The family head then regretted not obeying Tughuan *purghan*. He believed this disaster would have been avoided if his family had given *gashiduu* to Tughuan Nengneng.

Afterward, Yangxja's family became even more impoverished.

Years passed, and Duranzin's family became wealthy and wanted to buy the Yangxja family's courtyard compound and farmland from the Mo Family. After discussion, they reached an agreement. Duranzin bought the Mo Family holdings, and the Mo Family moved to their natal Lazhuang Village. One of Duranzin's sons moved into the Mo Family household and farmed the Mo fields.

Those who moved into the Mo Family compound were called Jighanzin by Tughuan villagers and the courtyard compound was known as the "Jighanzin compound."

The Jighanzin and Duranzin households were wealthy and bought land in Bujia Village in contemporary Danma Town. One brother (Niruu) was from the Jighanzin household, and a second brother (Shdanog) was from the Duranzin household. After they bought land in Bujia Village and farmed it for one or two years, they complained about the trouble walking to and from the land, so Niruu told Shdanog to live in Bujia Village, care for the fields, and build a household there. Later, they sold the Bujia land because neither brother wanted to live there.

Niruu was born and grew up in the Duranzin compound and later, was assigned to live in the Jighanzin courtyard compound. Niruu's father (name unknown) was Shdanog's father's (name unknown; he was called Shgeaadee) younger brother. Niruu's father died in his twenties after he fell into a toilet hole while in Xining to lodge a lawsuit. Niruu's uncle, Shgeaadee, then cared for Niruu and arranged for him to marry and live in the Jighanzin courtyard compound. Shgeaadee cared for two families (Jighanzin and Duranzin) at that time.

The years passed, and when Yangxja and his four brothers had grown up, their lives remained impoverished in Xranghuali. They then returned to their natal home in Tughuan Village in today's Danma Town and found their original courtyard compound and fields were occupied by the Duranzin family. They struggled to retrieve their former courtyard compound and farmlands. People

from Duranzin, Jighanzin, and other Tughuan residents disagreed. They said Yangxja and his four brothers should not return unless Yangxja's relatives paid what Niruu's family had paid to the Mo Family. Yangxja and his four brothers were too poor to pay, so the five brothers went to Niruu's home (Jighanzin household) every day to make trouble.

One day, Niruu mounted a horse and rode to Foori Gully.<sup>1</sup> At a steep turn, Yangxja and his four brothers leaped out from where they had hidden in a sheltered place, encircled Niruu, grabbed the reins of his fine horse, and declared that they wanted it. Niruu dismounted and handed them the reins. Yangxja and his four brothers then left, leading the horse.

Early the next morning, Niruu and Shdanog went to see Tughuan Nangsuu in Tughuan Village, Wushi Town, and complained about Yangxja and his four brothers' attack in great detail.

Tughuan Nangsuu replied that he could not deal with this dispute and told them to go to Xining to the court under Ma Bufang.

Niruu and Shdanog went to Xining and filed a complaint. The court officials said:

The five brothers appear to be hooligans. We can beat and jail them for some days, but it's not a real solution. They are too poor to make a living. The best way is for you two to return home, discuss this issue with your family and clan members, and make arrangements for the brothers.

Niruu and Shdanog returned home from Xining and invited all the adult villagers for a clan discussion. Niruu and Shdanog reported what Tughuan Nangsuu and the Xining court had said. Finally, an agreement was reached to build two simple rooms beside the Durani compound with wood that had been partially burned during a rebellion. The clan also contributed farmland to the five brothers.

The five brothers and their families moved into the newly built simple rooms and lived by cultivating the small fields they had been given. Later, four

---

<sup>1</sup> A deep gully between Lawaa Village (Danma Town) and Foori Village (Wushi Town). High cliffs were on both sides of the path. There were many steep hills and a deep depression in the bottom of the gully. Walking on this path frightened people. Historically, robbers hid along the gully path.

of the five brothers moved from Tughuan Village, while Yangxja stayed.

During the Land Reform Movement, the government assigned Yangxja family good farmland and wooden rooms because his family had been assigned to the Pingxia Zhongnong 'Poor and Lower Peasant' category. The assigned rooms for Yangxja's family were from Sunduu in Pudang Village. Sunduu and his family had fled to today's Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County, Gansu Province, to avoid being forcibly conscripted into the Ma family military forces in the 1940s. Therefore, Sunduu's rooms inside the household had been emptied for many years. Yangxja's family dismantled rooms in the Sunduu family compound and moved them to Tughuan Village where they built rooms for themselves.

Four sons were in my father's parents' household in the Jighani compound. My father was sent to his adoptive parents in the Durani compound while two sons became monks at Mantuu Monastery.<sup>1</sup> My father's eldest brother, Limudiinjiri (1912-1992), stayed in his own home. The family's condition was good since there was only one son in the Jighani compound.

Limudiinjiri took a second wife after paying sufficient money and became addicted to gambling. He was often absent from home and soon lost all the family's fields, property, livestock, and even his elder sister's woolen jacket. His family became terribly poor.

He then decided to flee to (the contemporary) Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County, Gansu Province with his family. In 1952, the Land Reform movement was implemented. Limudiinjiri's family was assigned to the Poor and Lower Peasant category and assigned farmland by the government. Limudiinjiri and his family then gave up the idea of fleeing to Tianzhu area, remained in their compound in Tughuan Village, and resumed their lives.

Niruu's brother, Shdandari, was a monk at Rgulang Lamasery.<sup>2</sup> Shdanog never spoke to his father. I never knew why. His father eventually moved to live in the Jighanzin compound with his nephew, Niruu, who was

---

<sup>1</sup> Mantuu (C, Mantou) Monastery was in Jingzhou Village, Danma Town and had had nine monks in 1989 (Pu 2013:77).

<sup>2</sup> Rgulang (T, Dgon lung byams pa gling, Dgon lung; C. Youningsi) is a Dge lugs Monastery located in Sitan Village, Wushi Town. Pu (2013:71-75) reports 396 monks in 1957. Smith (2013) reports "over 300 monks" (291) and "340 monks" (293).

assigned to live in the Mo Family compound. Meanwhile, Shdanog stayed in the Duranzin compound courtyard.

Duranzin finally became two families. One lived in the Duranzin compound, while the other moved into the Mo Family compound. They had many fields, and my family (Durani) also had plenty of fields in Tughuan Village.

The Yangxja and Jighani compounds had few fields, and the heads of the two families were gambling addicts and eventually became so poor they could no longer stay in the village. Yangxja's family moved. Jighani was about to go to the contemporary Tianzhu area when the Land Reform moment came, and he was assigned to the Poor and Lower Peasant category and allocated fields and livestock.

We lived on Tughuan Nangsuu's land, not the Tughuan *larang* 'administrative division managed by incarnation lamas' compound courtyard' built by Tughuan Living Buddha, who had a lot of farmland in the Tughuan area. People came to live in the Tughuan *larang* courtyard and became *zhuangtou* 'outsiders' who make a livelihood by farming the Living Buddha's land. Tughuan villagers came to live here from Tughuan Village in Wushi Town to collect wheat tax for Tughuan Nangsuu, guard Nangsuu ancestors' graves from being destroyed by personal enemies, or herd yaks and sheep. The big, high compound courtyard was built with Nangsuu's assistance.

In 1930, the *nangsuu* system was abolished when the Huzhu government was established. All *nangsuu* subjects were told to pay land taxes to county granaries, not the *nangsuu*. In about 1931, when my father was very young, he went to the county granary in Weiyuan Town to pay taxes. His family's name was not on the list because the *nangsuu* had previously collected taxes. Father and those he went with exchanged some cash for wheat and highland barley, ate a nice meal, bought some items, and returned home. The following year, they began paying land tax to county granaries because their names had been added to the list.

Graves of Tughuan people are on the mountainside east of Rdangyan Village, Wushi Town. Some said we moved to Tughuan Village in Danma Town from Wushi Town to guard the Tughuan ancestors' graves, including the tomb of our ancestor, Li Jingwang,<sup>1</sup> and his descendants. Before 1949, Tughuan

---

<sup>1</sup> Li Jingwang (856-908) was a Tang Dynasty (618-908) general (<http://bit.ly/2gCFtU6>, accessed 4 September 2017).

people from Rdangyan Village<sup>1</sup> and residents from Tughuan Village, Wushi Town, annually went to graveyards on Sangmang 'Mourning Day' around the fourth day of the third lunar month.

A forty-kilogram hog carcass was required in the graveyard on Mourning Day. The hog carcass was weighed with a steelyard in a donor's home and weighed a second time to verify the weight in the graveyard when people gathered that day. Each village provided one hog carcass once every three years in turn. This requirement was met by the households in turn in Tughuan (Danma), Rdangyan, and Tughuan (Wushi) villages. At that time, only four households were in Tughuan Village (Danma). If the hog carcass was over forty kilograms, the organizer cut the extra part and returned it to the hog donor. The donor had to provide *nenzhu* pork if it was less than forty kilograms.

## In 2017

In 2017, about four *mu* of fields were planted with pine trees in our plain fields, which made the trees easier to water. Locals decided planting pine trees in fields would earn more than rapeseed. This was true in the early 2000s. However, in 2016, a one-meter-tall pine tree sold for only twenty RMB. The price had sharply declined. Furthermore, more than ten years were required for a seedling to reach one meter in height, which explains why locals planted fewer pine trees in 2017.

We cultivated rapeseed, wheat, and potatoes on our other fields.

In 2017, my fourth son, Danjansirang (b. 1978), and his wife, Zhinzan (b. 1982), plowed our family's fields in spring with a tractor. After plowing and seeding the fields, Danjansirang installed elevators in Xining, while Zhinzan operated a taxi in Huzhu County Town.

Weeding was done by hiring women from our village or neighboring villages. In 2017, one woman was paid about seventy RMB per day.

Some local people owned/operated combines/harvesters that began appearing in the local Mongghul area in about 2009. In autumn, Zhinzan hired a combine to harvest the crops in a half-day. In 2017, the cost

---

<sup>1</sup> Village residents are also Tughuan people who were sent to guard Li Jinwang and the tombs of his family members from Tughuan Village, Wushi Town.



was about one hundred RMB per *mu* for sloping fields and eighty RMB for level fields. We did not transport the crops to the threshing ground, nor did we use a stone roller drawn by livestock as before. No one makes or uses threshing grounds in the local Mongghul area today.

After 2000, increasing numbers of local Mongghul sought employment opportunities in Xining and other cities and easily adapted to city life. After years of earning income, they purchased an apartment and permanently settled in urban areas.

The cultivated fields of those who left the village are no longer cultivated or are farmed by their relatives, clan members, or friends.

Village Mongghul no longer farm as they did in the past. Instead, they raise crops on certain fields for family consumption and plant pine and cypress trees and traditional Chinese herbs, e.g., Chinese angelica.

Modern machines have almost completely replaced traditional farming tools, and cattle, horses, mules, and donkeys have almost disappeared from the countryside.

## APPENDIX

Table 1. People.

Name	Birth/Death Dates	Description
Limuzhunmaa	b. 1942	narrator
Limusirang	1924-1987	Limuzhunmaa's father
Limusishiden	1968	Limuzhunmaa's second son
Nanshan Monk	~1890-1960	Limuzhunmaa's father's father's brother, a monk
Limuringan	1936-1990	Limuzhunmaa's cousin
Yangxja	unknown	Limuzhunmaa's fellow villager
Mo	unknown	local Chinese, he moved to and lived in Tughuan Village
Niruu	unknown	Limuzhunmaa's fellow villager
Shdanog	unknown	Limuzhunmaa's fellow villager
Shgeaadee	unknown	Limuzhunmaa's fellow villager

Limudiinjiri	1912-1992	Limuzhunmaa's father's older brother
Shdandari	unknown	Limuzhunmaa's fellow villager, a monk
Danjansirang	1978	Limuzhunmaa's fourth son
Zhinzan	1982	Limuzhunmaa's fourth son's wife

Table 2. Government Policies

Name	Year Begun	Description
Tudi Gaige Land Reform Movement	1950	The Land Reform Law, enacted in 1950, abolished landlord ownership of property and introduced peasant land ownership. From 1950-1951, land was confiscated from former landlords and redistributed to landless peasants, owners of small plots, and landlords, who now had to work the land to earn a living. <sup>1</sup>
Jiating Lianchan Chengbao Zerenzhi Land Contract Policy	1982	A form of agricultural production in which peasants, with the family as the unit, contracted land and other means of production and production tasks to collective economic organizations - mainly villages and groups. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://on.china.cn/2N7PNCs>, accessed 25 September 2022.

<sup>2</sup> <https://bit.ly/3R97HkT>, accessed 25 September 2022.

Gaoji Nongye Hezuoshe Advanced Agricultural Cooperative Team	1955	An economic organization of farmers based on collective ownership of major means of production. The teams established labor organizations internally to meet production needs. <sup>1</sup>
Siqingyundong Four Clean-ups Movement	1963- 1966	A socialist education movement carried out by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China from 1963-1966. The central leadership took charge personally. Millions of cadres went to the countryside and factories to carry out the movement. <sup>2</sup>

## REFERENCES

- Anonymous. 1993. *Huzhu tuzu zizhixian xianzhi 互助土族自治县志 [Huzhu Mongghul Autonomous County Annals]*. Xining 西宁: Qinghai renmin chubanshe 青海人民出版社 [Qinghai People's Press].
- Limusishiden and Charles Kevin Stuart. 2011. Mongghul Memories and Lives. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 8. <https://tinyurl.com/rsprvck8>, accessed 30 August 2023
- Limusishiden and Jugui 2011. Passions and Colored Sleeves: Mongghul Lives in Eastern Tibet. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 7. <https://tinyurl.com/2ufr6bmr>, accessed 30 August 2023
- Limusishiden. 2015. Health and Illness Among the Mongghul in Gerald Roche and CK Stuart (eds) *Asian*

<sup>1</sup> <https://bit.ly/3f5A46f>, accessed 25 September 2022.

<sup>2</sup> <https://bit.ly/3C75WAq>, accessed 25 September 2022.

*Highlands Perspectives* 36 Mapping the Monguor 30-63, 301-332.

<https://tinyurl.com/y3tyv7hn>, accessed 30 August 2023

Liu Fenggui, Zhang Yili, Feng Zhaodong, Hou Guangliang, Zhou Qiang, and Zhang Haifeng. 2010. The Impacts of Climate Change on the Neolithic Cultures of Gansu-Qinghai Region During the Late Holocene Megathremal. *Journal of Geographical Science* 20(3):417-430.

Ma GH, Dong Guanghui, Emma Lightfoot, Wang Hui, Liu XY, Jia Y, Zhang KR, Zhang R, and Chen Fahu. 2013. Stable Isotope Analysis of Human and Faunal Remains in the Western Loess Plateau, Approximately 2000 cal BC. *Archaeometry* November DOI: 10.1111/arc.1207 (accessed 4 September 2017).

Pu Wencheng 蒲文成 (ed). 2013. *Qinghai Zangchuan fojiao siyuan 青海藏传佛教寺院 [Qinghai Tibetan Buddhism Monasteries]*. Lanzhou 兰州: Gansu minzu chubanshe 甘肃民族出版社 [Gansu Nationalities Press].

Schram, Louis MJ. 2006 [1954-1961]. *The Monguors of the Kansu-Tibetan Frontier*. Xining: Plateau Publications, <http://bit.ly/2wmEDP7>, accessed 30 August 2017.

Smith, Stewart. 2013. *The Monasteries of Amdo: a Comprehensive Guide to the Monasteries of the Amdo Region of Tibet*. Np.

Yan Zhengde 严正德 and Wang Yiwu 王毅武 (eds). 1994. *Qinghai baike dacidian 青海百科大辞典 [Qinghai Encyclopedic Dictionary]*. Beijing 北京: Zhongguo caizheng jingji chubanshe 中国财政经济出版社 [China Financial and Economic Press].

## PHOTOGRAPHS

FIG 1. Mongghul traditional house (8 April 2019, Jugui).



FIG 2. Mongghul traditional house (15 September 2005, Jugui).



FIG 3. Mongghul traditional house and courtyard wall (8 April 2019, Jugui).



FIG 4. Mongghul traditional courtyard wall and front entrance (8 April 2019, Jugui).





FIG 5. Mongghul traditional courtyard wall (8 April 2019, Jugui).



FIG 6. *Njasi* 'plow' (8 April 2019, Jugui).



FIG 7. *Tiriga* 'cart' (8 April 2019, Jugui).





FIG 8. *Timuri sanja* 'metal fork', *tuiba* 'grain pusher', *gurixjog* 'wooden shovel', *tiuqi* 'broom', and *timuri sanja* 'metal fork' (8 April 2019, Jugui).



FIG 9. *Mozi* 'clod breaker' and two *luqi* 'stone rollers' (8 April 2019, Jugui).



FIG 10. New modern concrete houses and courtyard walls (3 October 2023, Limusishiden).



**FIG 11.** A new modern concrete second-story house (3 October 2023, Limusishiden).





FIG 12. Limusishiden's family's "Plain Land" (3 October 2023, Limusishiden).



FIG 13. Limusishiden's family's "Behind Threshing Ground Land" (3 October 2023, Limusishiden).





FIG 14. Hard surface road built in Tuguan Village in 2023 (3 October 2023, Limusishiden).



## Mongghul Agricultural Terms

### Crops

*buudi*, wheat  
*giizi*, rapeseed  
*huma*, hemp  
*mula pujog*, pea  
*sayog*, potatoes  
*sbai*, highland barley  
*shge pujog*, broad bean  
*yamu*, oats

### Manure

*fog/ngualii*, manure

### Fields

*biima ghajari*, sloping field  
*ghajari*, earth, land  
*szu ghajari*, irrigated field  
*texjin ghajari*, plain field  
*ula ghajari*, hill/mountain field  
*xiiti ghajari*, farrow field, unseeded field

### Plowing and Sowing

*arog*, carrying basket  
*dangbuu*, long-handled wooden mallet  
*dangghuali pugha*, smashing earth clods with a long wooden handle mallet  
*dangghuali*, earth clod  
*fuli*, plow  
*furai*, seeds  
*furai saji*, scattering seeds  
*fuuda*, long woolen bag  
*kuri*, a wooden box for seeding by hand  
*lodog*, triangular wooden box  
*njasi*, plow  
*njasi deeliga*, plow rope

*njasi holigha*, wooden head of a plow  
*njasi qigi*, wooden handle  
*timuri gurixjog*, iron spade  
*warima*, weigh  
*yiuyan*, whip

#### Farming Tools

*gurixjog*, wooden shovel  
*luqi*, stone roller  
*mozi*, clod breaker  
*timuri sanja*, metal fork  
*timuri sanja*, metal fork  
*tiriga*, cart  
*tiuqi*, broom  
*tuiba*, grain pusher

#### Weeding

*chuzi*, hoe  
*qanbii*, weeding trowel  
*rdunbu*, weed  
*wusi ligha*, weeding by hand when crops grow high  
*wusi shdee*, weeding

#### Harvesting

*buliu*, stone used to sharpen a sickle  
*buliuda*, sharpening  
*ghadi*, sickle  
*ghadi*, harvesting with a sickle  
*qog*, sheave

#### Threshing

*janqi*, threshing  
*kiriga*, grain winnowed by tossing grain mixed with chaff into  
the air with a wooden spade  
*lenja*, flail  
*liula*, pitchfork used to separate straw from grain and chaff



*luqi*, stone roller  
*luuzi*, stacks of piled sheaves high and solidly in stacks around a  
threshing ground's perimeter  
*mudi gurixjog*, wooden spade  
*sanja*, pitchfork  
*shdiriga*, threshing ground  
*shdiriga diriga*, untied sheaves scattered on the threshing  
ground  
*tiuqi*, broom

#### Other

*suuqang*, garden near the courtyard or inside the courtyard  
compound  
*cungunog*, *cong* 葱, onion  
*srinsog*, garlic  
*sai*, *cai* 菜, vegetable  
*jiusai*, *jiuca* 韭菜, chives  
*huangya sai*, *huangya cai* 黄芽菜, Chinese cabbage  
*bosai*, *bocai* 菠菜, spinach  
*yintog*, *yintao* 樱桃, cherry  
*lizi* 李子, plum  
*sbai alima*, apricot

#### NON-ENGLISH TERMS

*alog qanhai*, ox-hide shoes  
*bai abo*, 白阿勃, a wheat variety  
*bankang* 板炕  
*bu*, I  
Bujia 补家  
Chaka 茶卡  
*chi* 尺  
Chileb, Chile 赤列  
Danglan, a place name  
*dangghuali*, earth clod  
*dangghuali manta*, digging large, rough bricks

*dangghuali pugha*, smashing earth clods

*dangghuali tangghula*, mallets

*dangrinla*

Danglangang, a place name

Danjansirang, a person's name

Danma 丹麻

Datong 大通 Hui and Tu Autonomous County

dgon lung དགོན་ལུང་།

dgon lung byams pa gling དགོན་ལུང་བླ་མ་པ་གླིང་།

Donggou 东沟

Dongshan 东山

*dou* 斗

*durani*, low

*durishdi*

Duranzin

*fen* 分

Fengtai 丰台 Village

Foori, Huobao 霍包 Village

*foori ghajari*, grave land

Fulaan Nara, an area name

*fulaan xruu*, red soil

*funong* 富农, rich peasant

*galaohan* 尕老汉, high-yielding wheat variety

Gansu 甘肃 Province

Gaoji Nongye Hezuoshe 高级农业合作社, Advanced

Agricultural Cooperative Team

*gashiduu*, gifts of cash, rapeseed oil, wheat seeds, and butter  
given to *purghan*

*ger huinagu*, behind courtyards

*ghajari*, land or field

*ghoori*, two

*ghua*, give

*gidabu*, *gedabu* 疙瘩布

*goai*, a variable volume measure containing about 0.5 kg of  
grain

Haidong 海东 City

Haixi 海西 Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture  
Halazhigou 哈拉直沟  
Haliqi, an area name  
Han 汉  
*hanasigha*, eyebrow  
*hayog*, a handful  
*hong abo* 红阿勃, wheat variety  
*hongmai* 红麦, old wheat variety planted in spring  
Hongyazigou 红崖子沟  
*huomai* 火麦, old wheat variety planted in spring  
*huuguazi*, woolen jacket  
Jadunbulog, a place name  
jarima budaa, gruel with oat flour  
Jiating Lianchan Chengbao *Zerenzhi* 家庭联产承包责任制,  
Land Contract with Individuals  
Jighani, Upper  
Jighanzin  
Jingzhou 锦州  
*joliula*, scoop  
Jugui  
Karilang  
Kayue 卡约  
*kidiisza*  
*kile*, tell  
*kudu*, home  
kuiden, cold  
*kun*, person  
*langang*, low wall  
*langzi*, green dried bundled oat straw  
*larang*, administrative division managed by an incarnation  
lama  
Lawaa, Lawa 拉哇  
Lazhuang 拉庄  
Ledu 乐都 Region  
Li Jingwang 李晋王  
*ligunaji*

Liminsuu, Li Mengsuo 李梦索, a person's name  
Limudiinjiri, a person's name  
Limuringan, a person's name  
Limusirang, a person's name  
Limusishiden, Li Dechun 李得春, author's name  
Limuzhunmaa, a person's name  
Liujia 柳家  
*liulagungi*  
Longwangshan 龙王山  
Lu 鲁  
Ma Bufang 马步芳  
*malang*, tomorrow  
Mantuu, Mantou 馒头  
Mao Zedong 毛泽东  
*maxuu*, ladle  
Ming 明 Dynasty  
Mo 莫  
Mojia 莫家  
*molán* 毛蓝  
Mongghul, Monguor, Tu 土  
*mu* 亩  
Mughua, a place name  
Mughuagang, a place name  
*mula*, small  
*mula shangzi*, shengzi 升子  
Nangsuu, Nangso, Angsuo 昂锁  
Nanshan Badii, 南山 Monk  
Nengneng, Niangniang 娘娘  
*nenzhu*, *nianzhu* 年猪  
*nda*  
*nige*, one  
Niruu, a person's name  
*niuduri*, today  
*pei*  
Ping'an 平安 Region  
Pingda 平大

Pudang, Pudonggou 普洞沟

Pu Wencheng 蒲文成

*purghan*, sedaned or pole deities

*qadigha*

Qangxa, a place name

*qi*, you

*qimu*

Qinghai 青海 Province

*ragungi*

*ranji*

Rdangyan, Dongyuan 东元

Rgulang, dgon lung དགོན་ལུང་།

dgon lung byams pa gling དགོན་ལུང་བླ་མ་པ་གླིང་། Youningsi 佑宁寺

Rugu, back to

Sangmang, Mourning Day

*sara*, month

*Sbai kidiisza joliula liulagungi yii, buudi kidiisza jang nige hayog yisi yii.* There will be scoops of highland barley grain if it lodges, but only a handful of straw if wheat does the same.

Shangzi, Shengzi 升子

Shibadonggou 十八洞沟

*shdaghua*, firewood

Shdandari, a person's name

Shdangja, Dongjia 东家

Shdanog, a person's name

Shdara, Dala 达拉

*shdiriga*, threshing ground

*shdiriga huinagu*, behind threshing ground

*shge*, big

Shgeaadee, a person's name

Shge Kizuu, a field's name

*shge shangzi*

Shge Tingere, Great Heaven

Siqingyundong 四清运动, Four Clean-ups Movement

Sitan 寺滩

Slidii, Songde 松德

Smee, Ximi 西米

Srangdanzhu, a person's name

Sughuanghuali, Suobugou 索卜沟

Songduo 松多

Sunduu, a person's name

*suuqang*, garden plots

*suurishidi*, a pyramidal structure of adobe bricks or soil

*szu*, water

Taizi 台子

Tala, plain land

Tang 唐 Dynasty

*Tehgi kile gashiduu yii ghusada ligunaji, ali sara ali durishdi  
teni kudu ghoori kun ranji tehgini saighangi nige  
dangrinla.* Please go say that it's fine if they don't want  
to give me *gashiduu*, but please know that two guests  
will visit them on a certain day in a certain month, and  
they must entertain them well.

*texjin*, plain

Tianzhu 天祝

Tudi Gaige 土地改革 Land Reform movement

Tughuan, Tuhun, Tuguan 土官

*tugun*, a pit in a Mongghul yard

*Tughuan Nengneng, bu gujaina qadigha adagu sghuudini qi  
nda*

*gualanda gua. Niuduri malang bu gujaina qadigha shdagu,  
shdaghua yiigu sghuudini qi yang gashiduu hgilela  
ragungi, bu qimu ghua shdaji gua!* Tughuan Nengneng!  
You didn't see me when I could not fill my stomach, but  
when I became better off and could fill my stomach and  
find firewood for my family, you come to get *gashiduu*  
from me. I don't want to give you *gashiduu*!

*ula*, mountain, hill

*Ula ghajarini kun xiitilaji zhuangja awunii, texjin ghajarini  
kun szu sulaji zhuangja awunii.* Mongghul are

highlanders and get good harvests from fallow fields  
while lowlanders irrigate their fields.

*warishdang*, clan members

Weiyuan 威远 Town

Wen 温

Wushi 五十

Xining 西宁 City

*Xiaohongmai* 小红麦, an old wheat variety planted in spring

Xiawaer, Shibadonggou 十八洞沟

*xiitila*, fallow

*xiitilaji*

Xrajin, a place name

Xranghuali, Shagoushan 沙沟山

Xruu Aadee, Earth God

*xuara*, a large woolen blanket sheet

*yang*, again

Yangxja, a person's name

*yii*, have

*yiigu*

*yikang*, a sleeping adobe platform

*yisi*, straw

Zhade, Baizhuazi 白抓子

*zhanmog*, *zhanmao* 毡帽, woolen hat

Zhinzan, a person's name

*zhuangja*, *zhuangjia* 庄稼

*zhuangtou* 庄头, outsiders

THE LNGA BA'I BZHI RGYAL 'BIG *BSANG*  
OFFERING' IN SGRO RONG BO TIBETAN  
COMMUNITY, REB GONG, MTSHO SNGON  
(QINGHAI) PROVINCE, PR CHINA<sup>1</sup>

Lhun 'grub ལུན་གུབ་

ABSTRACT

An A mdo Tibetan ritual locally known as Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal 'Big *Bsang* Offering' is held on the fifth day of the fifth Chinese lunisolar month in Sgro rong bo (Jiaolongwu) Village, Mdo ba (Duowa) Town, Thun rin (Tongren) City, Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. Personal experiences, observations, interviews with local community members, and relevant photographs are provided.

KEYWORDS

Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal, Sgro rong bo, Tibetan ritual, *rgyan mchod*, *bsang* offering, Reb gong, Huangnan

This paper presents Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal, a male-only ritual<sup>2</sup> held in Sgro rong bo Community in Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. Officially designated a 'village', Sgro rong bo was a herding community in Mdo ba Town with 212 families and 978 residents in 2023.<sup>3</sup> Before 1958, Sgro rong bo included eight *tsho ba* 'subgroups': Sga ru, Sgro tshang, Tsho 'du, Gyu sngogs, Ma ra, Tsho bzhi, Kha rgya, and Lcags so. Locals continued to use

---

<sup>1</sup> Lhun 'grub ལུན་གུབ་. 2025. The Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal 'big bsang Offering' in Sgro rong bo Tibetan Community, Reb gong, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:54-75.

<sup>2</sup> In 2024, a father might have brought a very young daughter to this ritual, and no one would have been critical. However, there was no memory of females actively participating in the ritual.

<sup>3</sup> The 2023 population data here and below were provided in August 2023 by village leader, Lcags thar rgyal (b. 1988).



the term *tsho ba*. In about 1958, the government created four *ru khag* 'brigades'<sup>1</sup> - Sga ru, Sgro tshang, Gyu sngogs, and Tsho 'du.

I also discuss changes local people made in 2024 in holding rituals, ritual preparation, and cell phone use and influence.

I began attending the Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal 'Big Bsang<sup>2</sup> Offering' when I was ten years old in 2001. I eagerly anticipated every festival, ritual, and public activity because I could wear clean clothes, ride horses, and receive candy from others. I begged my father (b. 1964) to let me attend local community activities. Such opportunities were rare because my four siblings and I had to take turns. My elder brother and I received more chances than my three sisters because females could not attend *bsang* offering rituals and *lab tse*<sup>3</sup> festivals.

I first attended Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal in 2001. Father had announced I would go just as I got home from collecting caterpillar fungi with my elder sisters the night before. I was delighted and asked my mother (b. 1966) to look for my new clothes. She said, "You don't have a new robe, but you can wear your brother's robe, the one you wore last New Year."

I nodded happily. In families with several children, it is usual for children to wear their elder siblings' clothing. I have regularly worn my elder siblings' clothes since I am the fourth child.

Mother started looking for my favorite leather boots and a Tibetan robe. Father sat on the *hutse* 'heatable bed/eating platform' making *bsang khug* 'food offering bag' with our little hand-powered sewing machine. Father instructed Mother, "Prepare about one and a half kilograms of butter, a small amount of dry cheese,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ru khag* 'administrative division' was understood as *dadui* in Chinese or *tos*, a Tibetan version of the Chinese term *dui*.

<sup>2</sup> *Bsang* 'incense', 'incense offerings', 'purification'.

<sup>3</sup> Locals believe *lab tse* are where mountain deities dwell. *Lab tse* are constructed with wooden poles resembling arrows, sheep wool thread, and stones, suggesting presenting weapons to the mountain deities. Locally, *lab tse* are atop mountains and renewed yearly for locals to receive protection from mountain deities.

and *rtsam pa*<sup>1</sup> 'barley flour' for us to eat tomorrow. Put the butter separately into *za ta*<sup>2</sup> above the 'barley flour' and cheese."

Mother replied, "I'll do that after preparing clothes for my son. I'm not sure which bag has the Tibetan robes."

As Mother searched, Father told me to collect our livestock in the mountains with my elder sister, Tshe ring skyid (b. 1988). We climbed the mountains in separate directions because our sheep and yaks were grazing on different mountains. Elder Sister soon drove our sheep back. I quickly gathered the yaks and followed as every household noisily herded their livestock into their pens. Elder Sister and I tethered the yaks and fed the young and weak calves corn meal mixed with '*ba cha*'.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, Great Aunt (Mgon po mtsho, 1944-2024) made butter lamps. My family made at least one hundred butter lamps a month and lit them on one of the seven or eight religious days<sup>4</sup> every month. We also lit one or two lamps every night before going to bed. Any family member could light a lamp in front of our shrine shelf, but Great Aunt usually did this in my family. I helped her put ghee into *rkung bu* 'copper butter lamps' and arrange them on a board in front of our shrine shelf.

Mother soon shouted for us to have supper. Father was still sewing *bsang khug* with white cloth and decorating its edges with colorful silk. I hoped the night would pass quickly as I put my clean

---

<sup>1</sup> *Rtsam pa* 'roasted barley flour' was a common Tibetan food often mixed with butter, dried cheese, and hot milk tea. Sugar might also have been added. *Rtsam pa* was known by several local names, e.g., local children called it *b+ha b+ha*.

<sup>2</sup> Two connected cloth pouches for storing *rtsam pa*, cheese, and butter locals used when they went long distances to worship and graze livestock far from their homes.

<sup>3</sup> Rape meal was commonly fed to livestock (sheep, yaks, and horses).

<sup>4</sup> There are seven or eight auspicious days in a month based on the Chinese lunisolar calendar. Only some months have thirty or thirty-one days. The thirtieth day is the eighth day with religious significance. Certain locals avoided killing livestock and consuming meat during such days. Cabezon (2009:5) writes that *dus bzang* days are considered auspicious.

clothes by my bed and went to bed soon after supper.

Mother woke me around five a.m. with, "Lhu b+ha, get up quickly! Father will take you to Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal. How happy you are today!"

I sat up and said, "Am I late? Has father left?"

Mother said, "Father is saddling our horse. You will leave after breakfast. I prepared everything you need. Hold Father's robe tightly when he takes you on our horse."

I nodded and ate rice porridge, milk, and wild red yams. Father hurriedly returned and said, "Sgrol kho! I saw the rays of our neighbors' flashlights. They are about to leave. Give me *rtsam pa* quickly. We will go with other neighbors. One of them will bring Lhu b+ha. The two of us are too heavy for our horse."

Mother handed Father a bowl of *rtsam pa* and poured tea as he made a ball of *rtsam pa*. After breakfast, he rode our fine horse. I clutched the saddle edge after Mother picked me up and put me behind Father. It was about six-thirty and dark, so Father held a flashlight with the reins.

Representatives from six households went together. About one kilometer from my family's house, Uncle Tshe b+ho'u (b. 1971) joined us, riding a black horse and leading his finest white horse. Uncle said, "A rga rta lo, let Lhu b+ha ride my white horse. You have a big *ta len* 'saddle bags'. Too much weight for your horse."

Father replied, "Your horse must be in today's horse race training. It's not good riding it in the early morning. I'll ask someone else to take him."

Uncle Tshe b+ho'u said, "It's very gentle, so it's not a problem for a little boy to ride it," dismounted, and put me on his white horse.

This was my first time to ride a racehorse. I was very excited. I asked Father to let me ride Uncle Tshe b+ho'u's horse and join the horse race. Uncle Tshe b+ho'u and father laughed and said, "Once the horse runs fast, you will be blown away by the wind."

I didn't reply but hoped I would grow up quickly and join horseraces. After we rode for about twenty minutes, we heard birds

flying and chirping. Father no longer held the flashlight as it became lighter around us.

When we neared our destination, we could see the *bsang khri* where the Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal ritual was held annually. Father kicked his horse to speed up and said, "We should go faster. Others have probably arrived and are making *rgyan mchod*."<sup>1</sup>

## PHOTOGRAPHS

FIG 1. Second Brigade Sga ru residents waited for this *rgyan mchod* to be offered on the fifth day of the fifth Chinese lunisolar month (2020, Lhun 'grub). *Rgyan mchod* was a term for butter figures shaped like *dkar gtor* 'sculptured dough offering'. The *dkar gtor*'s two wings resembled garuda wings. A *dkar gtor* had a sharp-pointed top, a round bulbous middle, and a wide round bottom. The sharp top indicated hope for a sharp mind, the rounded middle was hope for wealth, and the round, wide bottom was hope for solid power. A khu dpon tshe ring rnam rgyal (b. 1966), a lay tantrik practitioner, came to my home to chant *Sgrol ma'i rlung rta*<sup>2</sup> in 2019. I asked what objects should be prepared to make a *dkar gtor* when Father and I were making *dkar gtor* for *bsang* offerings. He explained, "*Dkar* means "white" and refers to *dkar gsum*, 'the three main foods with no connection to meat (milk, yogurt, and butter)'. You also need *ngar gsum*, 'the three main sweets' (white sugar, honey, and brown sugar) used to make a good *dkar gtor*."

---

<sup>1</sup> Figures of sacramental cakes made with butter.

<sup>2</sup> *Sgrol ma'i rlung rta* 'The Wind Horse of the Liberating Goddess' is a scripture often associated with *Sgrol ma*/Tara, who embodies compassion and swift assistance.



FIG 2. The Sgro rong bo *bsang khri* 'offering altar'<sup>1</sup> where villagers often burnt *bsang* just after offering *bsang* during Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal in Sgro rong bo Village on the fifth day of the fifth Chinese lunisolar month (2021, Bo kho). Locals believed Sgro

---

<sup>1</sup> *Bsang khri*: *Bsang* 'incense offering' 'purification'. *Khri* 'stupa base'. *Bsang khri* refers to the stupa or where villagers often offer *bsang*.

rong bo'i bsang khri was built during the time of the Third Skyabs mgon<sup>1</sup> incarnation. The Third's saddles, saddle blankets, and bridles were placed at the stupa center, which was believed to provide protection and help from A myes gur.<sup>2</sup> For example, locals circumambulated the *bsang khri* to cure heart disease.

'Dzam gling spyi bsang had several interpretations. A khu dpon tshe ring rnam rgyal explained via WeChat:

This practice didn't start in recent years. I recall participating in 'Dzam gling spyi bsang as a child, but I need clarification on its origins. According to elders, every time 'Dzam gling ge sar rgyal po (King Ge sar of 'Dzam gling) was victorious in battle, a grand *bsang* offering was held to celebrate. Over time, it became a tradition. The date for 'Dzam gling spyi bsang is not standardized. It is observed on the fifteenth day of the fifth Tibetan lunisolar<sup>3</sup> month in the Lha sa vicinity, the eleventh day of the second Chinese lunisolar month in farming regions around Thun rin (Tongren) City, and the fifth day of the fifth Chinese lunisolar month in herding areas such as Sgro rong bo."

---

<sup>1</sup> A general name for eight incarnations of Shar skyabs mgon skal ldan rgya mthso: Yab rje bla ma shar skyabs mgon skal ldan rgya mthso (1607-1677), Ngag dbang 'phrin las rgya mtsho (1678-1714), Dge 'dun 'phrin las rab rgyas (1740-1794), Blo bzang chos grags rgya mtsho (1794-1843), Blo bzang 'phrin las rgya mtsho (1843-1844), Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgya mtsho (1844-1858), Blo bzang 'phrin las lung rtogs rgya mtsho (1916-1978), and Bstan 'dzin 'jigs med skal ldan dpal bzang (b. 1979). See Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo (2002:2329) for more.

<sup>2</sup> A myes gur is a form of Mahakala originally from Sa skya Monastery in Sa skya Town, Sa skya County, about 127 kilometers west of Gzhis ka rtse (Shigatse City), the Tibet Autonomous Region. The deity was invited to Rong bo Monastery, and a temple was built. Rtse khog villagers and certain farming areas in Reb gong worshipped it. See Mdo smad lo rgyus chen mo (2009:410) for more.

<sup>3</sup> This calendar is based on the Tibetan Lunisolar Calendar used in the Lha sa City area. When Sgro rong bo locals employed the term Bod rtis 'Tibetan lunisolar calendar', they referred to the Chinese lunisolar calendar. However, this refers more widely to the former calendar.

Another account explained that when Padmasambhava came to Tibet and established Bsam yas gtsug lag khang 'Bsam yas Monastery,' a grand *bsang* offering was held to commemorate the monastery's founding. Later, it came to be known as 'Dzam gling spyi bsang'.<sup>1</sup>

Locals believed 'Dzam gling spyi bsang' was held in many Tibetan areas. Spyi bsang referred to a collective *bsang* offering, commonly held at the beginning of summer, to worship mountain deities and the hope for healthy livestock and bountiful harvests in farming areas. The *bsang* offering was made in the location of the *bsang khri* - ranged from a small flat stone area to a larger space where a hundred sacks of barley might have been offered. Each family's house in Sgro rong bo had a *bsang khri* behind it. When moving among different pastures for grazing, a father's first task was to create a *bsang khri* and offer *bsang* to the mountain deities to ward off potential harm such as illness, livestock theft, and storm disasters in the new pasture.



---

<sup>1</sup> 'Dzam gling suggests 'universe' and 'King 'Dzam gling'.

FIG 3. *Bon rgya* attended to chant scriptures associated with 'Jigs byed 'Bhairava' transmitted by Shar skyabs mgon skal ldan rgya mtsho. (Rtse khog County Town, 16 October 2022, Skal bzang rgya mtsho). *Bon rgya* (CT; LT: *ban rgya*)<sup>1</sup> traditionally referred to monks, but locals in my home area used this term to describe people who performed rituals in Sgro rong bo. Local families easily enlisted the help of *bon rgya* members to conduct rituals as instructed by a *bla ma* or a *rtsis ba* 'diviner'. *Bon rgya* were originally selected from Sgro rong bo for several reasons. First, geographical isolation from our county town and Rong bo Monastery<sup>2</sup> meant two days for our ancestors to reach Rong bo Monastery and invite monks to their homes to chant and hold rituals. After reaching the monastery, finding monks willing to come to Mdo ba was challenging due to the long distance and inconvenient transportation. As a solution, our ancestors chose locals who could read Tibetan, learn simple rituals and scripture chants, and perform what they had been taught. This became a tradition and was passed down to subsequent generations. Dating this system is ongoing. However, according to information shared by A khu dpon tshe ring rnam rgyal in 2022, the *bon rgya* tradition has a history of five generations. As of 2023, twenty *bon rgya* members chanted various scriptures and performed more

---

<sup>1</sup> CT=colloquial Tibetan; LT=Literary Tibetan. It should also be noted that a farming village in Reb gong and a large herding community in Rtse khog have the same name - Bon rgya.

<sup>2</sup> Rong bo Monastery (Rong bo bde chen chos 'khor gling) is a Dge lugs monastery in Thun rin City, Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Nian and Bai (1993:153) attributed the monastery's founding to Bsam gtan rin chen (Sanmudan Renqi), the eldest son of Mdo sde 'bum (Dodé Bum). Bsam gtan rin chen later became the head of Rong bo Monastery. The monastery's spiritual lineage is rooted in the teachings of Chos rje don grub rin chen (Chöjé Döndrup Rinchen, 1290-1364), who taught Tsong kha ba. Rong bo bsam gtan rin chen (Rongwo Samten Rinchen), Chos rje don grub rin chen's disciple, played a significant role in the monastery's history. Furthermore, Shar skyabs mgon skal ldan rgya mthso (1607-1677) is acknowledged as the first reincarnation of Bsam gtan rin chen and is known for his service as the abbot of Rong bo bde chen chos 'khor gling.



complex rituals, e.g., Bskang ba, Rta mgrin bzlog pa, and G.yang 'bod.



Table 1. In 2021, Sgro rong bo had twenty *bon rgya*.

Names	Year of Birth
Sko lo	1943
Aja' dbyangs dphal ldan	1954
Tshe go	1955
Mgo rgya	1958
Rtam kho	1965
Rta mgrin dbang rgyal	1965
Tshe lug	1966
Rta mgrin tshe ring	1967
Rdo rje	1970
Mchod rtan	1972
Sgrol dkar skyabs	1973
Rta b+he	1975
Ka me	1977
Rta ma	1978
Rta lo	1981
Skal bzang rgya mtsho	1983

Lcags thar rgyal	1983
Tshe ring rnam rgyal	1983
Sha bo	1993
Rdo rje tshe ring	2001

Table 2. *Bon rgya* chanted scriptures during Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal when villagers offered *bsang*. They sat by the *bsang khri* and chanted together. Scriptures' names and descriptions:

Scripture names	Details
Skyabs 'gro sems bskyed 'The Generation of Mind from Taking Refuge' is a four-line verse from the short text proper, known as <i>Taking Refuge</i> .	Locals say, " <i>Chos kyi sngon ma skyabs 'gro, zas kyi sngon ma mchod kha</i> 'Chant Skyabs 'gro before every chanting, offer deities every time before you eat'." Skyabs 'gro should be chanted at the start of every chanting to take refuge in the Three Jewels <sup>1</sup> while imagining and expecting enlightenment for all beings suffering from heat, cold, and hunger. Enlightenment for other beings is <i>sems bskyed</i> 'mind generation'.
Bla ma'i gsol 'debs 'Pray for <i>Bla ma</i> '	<i>Bla ma</i> refers to the <i>bla ma</i> who historically have religious connections with locals who believe in the same sect, and mostly live in the monastery where villagers worship often. Locals also say and believe, " <i>Gzhan gyi bla ma rtsi tog yin, rang gi bla ma me tog yin</i> 'See other <i>bla ma</i> of different places as an abundance of weeds, see your own <i>bla ma</i> as flowers among the weeds'." One's personal <i>bla ma</i> should be worshiped first. <i>Bla ma</i> also refers to teachers, explaining why locals believe teachers should be always respected.

<sup>1</sup> The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are the three jewels of Buddhism.

Yi dam skad gcig drung skyed 'Tutelary Deity Skad gcig drung skyed '	One <i>bon rgya</i> told me when <i>bon rgya</i> start chanting, they should concentrate on the tutelary deity possessing them while beseeching mountain deities to protect the villagers from harms and difficulties.
Chos skyong gi bsang 'Bsang for Dharma Protectors' <sup>1</sup>	<i>Bsang</i> is offered to <i>bla ma</i> , <i>yi dam</i> , <i>chos skyong</i> , and <i>gzhi bdag</i> in this order. <i>Gzhi bdag</i> refers to local deities, potent spirits associated with the region. Locals believed that they need good luck to complete whatever they do, and only local deities can help bring good luck. For example, locals collected caterpillar fungi from the beginning of the fourth to the middle of the fifth lunar months. Before collecting caterpillar fungi, they offered <i>bsang</i> to the local deities to ask for help to collect as many caterpillar fungi as possible. Sgro rong bo, where I was born and raised, was home to five primary <i>gzhi bdag</i> 'local deities': A myes skyer lung, A myes gyag smying, A myes rdza rgan, A myes shug rgan, and A myes ri rgan.
Rlung rta'i <i>bsang</i> 'Bsang of Wind Horses'	
Gzhi bdag gi bsang 'Bsang for Mountain Deities'	
Bsngo ba dang smon lam 'Dedication and Aspiration'	

## THE LNGA BA'I BZHI RGYAL RITUAL

### PREPARATION

The day before the Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal festival, Sgro rong bo village elders met at a local home near the *bsang khri*. They discussed what villagers should bring to the festival, e.g., butter, milk, cash, kettles, water containers, pots, sacks of dry yak dung

---

<sup>1</sup> A generic term referring to any verse of supplication to mountain deities, not the name of a particular ritual text. The same case is true for the next three entries in the table.

for fuel, and juniper, and the amount to collect from each brigade or family. Other issues included which brigade should make *bsang khug*<sup>1</sup> (and of what color), how many *bsang khug* they should make, and who should make *rgyan mchod* in each brigade because only a few men were skilled at making flowers, goats, conch shells, and gems out of butter.

After discussion and assigning work to the four brigades, each brigade leader returned to their brigade and assigned responsibilities. For example, each family head needed to bring one and a half kilograms of butter, two bottles of milk, and two *rgya ma of rtsam pa*.

Before 2012, brigade leaders rode motorcycles to inform villagers what they needed to do, bring, and prepare for *rgyan mchod*. After WeChat became widely popular, each brigade formed a WeChat group, and village leaders sent directions via WeChat.

We made *rgyan mchod* on the festival day when I was a child and offered it as part of *bsang*. Consequently, we only needed to prepare a little before the festival day. Later, making *rgyan mchod* was competitive between brigades, and elders evaluated which brigade's *rgyan mchod* was the best size, best appearance, and most complete. Consequently, every family head gathered at a home where everyone could meet conveniently and make *rgyan mchod*. Every family was required to give *rus cha*<sup>2</sup> the day before Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal. An absent family head was required to give 'grig,<sup>3</sup> so few missed the preparation meeting.

Moreover, on the preparation day, men skilled in creating butter figures made a *rgyan mchod* model by binding

---

<sup>1</sup> *Bsang khug* refers to self-made cloth bags for *bsang rtsi* men carried when offering *bsang*.

<sup>2</sup> *Rus cha* is a local term for collecting food, equipment, and cash to do something, e.g., a collective ritual activity with collected money and food. *Rus cha* was written as *rug khral* 'collecting tax' in textbooks.

<sup>3</sup> 'Grig was a local term indicating punishment for being absent from meetings and rituals.

three pieces of wood together in the shape of a bird with a height of approximately 1.6 meters. The butter contributions from each household were combined and mixed until it was pliable enough to make figures. Next, skilled men made *rgyan mchod* with well-mixed butter while other men made *rstam pa* dough for *dkar stor*. Only men made *rgyan mchod*.<sup>1</sup>

While making the *rgyan mchod*<sup>2</sup> model, *rtsam pa* dough, and *bsang rtsi*,<sup>3</sup> flowers, conch shells, and livestock figures were not made. Those were relatively easy tasks, so locals made them on the festival day when locals arrived at the *bsang khri*. Instead, villagers prepared around ten sacks of dried yak dung, *su ru* 'brushwood', and juniper for offerings the next day. They disbanded at around nine p.m. and returned home.

#### THE Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal FESTIVAL DAY

The morning of Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal, villagers, especially men, got up early, offered a small amount of *bsang* behind their houses, and prepared what they would take to the festival. *Bsang rtsi* consisted of mostly *sher rtsig* 'roasted barley' with butter, brown sugar, *bsang rdzas ril bu* 'local monastery made grain pills', raisins, red jujubes, fresh fruit, crystal sugar, milk, and yogurt. *Dkar zas* 'vegetarian food' might have been offered to mountain deities who were *dkar phyogs* 'peaceful deities'.<sup>4</sup> *Dkar zas* was only offered to mountain deities during the Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal day.

After *bsang rtsi* preparations, men wore new Tibetan robes

---

<sup>1</sup> Men did not share a bed with women before attending important competitions such as horse races to avoid bad luck to the man. Additionally, men avoided having sex during a woman's menstrual period because it was thought to weaken a man's fortune. A husband also avoided being near his wife when she gave birth.

<sup>2</sup> *Rgyan* 'decoration', *mchod* 'offer', refers to the detailed work of making butter flowers, conch shells, and livestock figures.

<sup>3</sup> Roasted barley to offer mountain deities.

<sup>4</sup> Cabezón (2009) classified mountain deities as *dkar phyogs* and *nag phyogs* 'wrathful deities'.

to attend the festival. Before 2002, there were only three motorcycles in Sgro rong bo. Those without motorcycles rode horses to the festival. Later, more villagers bought motorcycles, trucks, and small cars. No one rode horses to festivals in 2003.

Villagers arrived at the *bsang khri* site at around nine a.m. Locals recognized *bsang* as offerings to mountain deities. Some villagers offered sacks of barley, tea bricks, and butter to mountain deities, especially when there was illness and traffic accidents, and when attending large competitions, horsing races, and celebrating special days such as Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal. Villagers also referred to *bsang* as *bsang mchod* 'bsang offering' and believed that the more offerings they made, the more protection mountain deities would bestow.

During Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal, villagers offered the largest *bsang* offering they made annually. Every man from each household joined. If a man could not join, their family entrusted *bsang rtsi* and other offerings to a relative or friend, so every household was included in offerings.

Before offering the big *bsang* on the festival day, young men cleaned the *bsang khri*. They removed ash, put dry brushwood in a circle, spread dry yak dung and juniper branches over the brushwood, and flattened it. Offerings steadily increased. The flames intensified after the brushwood was set on fire, and everyone began chanting a *bsang* scripture loudly. At this time, each brigade's *rgyan mchod* was offered. Young men from each brigade placed the *rgyan mchod* on the fire in turn. The four *rgyan mchod* were set on the fire in the four directions. Villagers put *gos* 'silk cloth' around the four *rgyan mchod* after it was set on fire. Lastly, each man held up their *bsang khug* and offerings to offer their own *bsang*. Offering procedures were as below:

- 1 Offer *dkar zas* food, garment silk, tea bricks, and *kha btags*.
- 2 Offer tea, milk, yogurt, liquor, and drinks.
- 3 Blow conch shells.
- 4 Set off fireworks.

5 Scatter paper *rlung rta*.

6 Pour *chub*.<sup>1</sup>

7 Circumambulate the *bsang khri* and shout praises of deities.

8 *Bon rgya* and *bsang* chanting and scriptures

#### HORSERACE PREPARATION

The festival ended at around two p.m. after lunch at the *ba kha*.<sup>2</sup> Locals brought one or two bottles of milk from each household and made a big pot of milk tea with black brick tea. Every man brought his *za ta* with *rstam pa*, cheese, butter, and one or two bowls. Villagers drank milk tea and ate *rtsam pa*. However, after about 2015, fewer people brought *za ta* and ate *rtsam pa*. Instead, they mainly ate fried noodles, eggs, rice, and vegetables and drank Pepsi and Coca-Cola. Various snacks were brought from shops and restaurants in Mdo ba Town<sup>3</sup> or shops near Gad dmar Primary School, ten kilometers from Mdo ba Town to the west.

Before 2010, locals rode horses to Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal. Once the *bsang* offering was complete and after lunch, villagers rode to a wide grassland known as Gad dmar thang, one kilometer from the *bsang khri*. Horses that would participate in the horserace on the seventeenth day of the fifth Chinese lunisolar month rehearsed on this day. The horse owners took their horses to the starting line while other men went to a higher location to watch and enjoy the horserace.

---

<sup>1</sup> Purified water.

<sup>2</sup> *Ba kha* 'three-stone hearth', *ba ma* 'pot set atop the stones', *ba kha* 'area around the hearth'. During Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal, each brigade had a *ba kha* where villagers had lunch in four groups after finishing the *bsang* offering.

<sup>3</sup> For a video of the town center, see <https://zenodo.org/records/7536594>, accessed 31 May 2025.

## CONCLUSION

Amid changing social dynamics, Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal in 2023 was an intricate dance between tradition and modernity. Once a large, important part of community life, it has become simpler because more young people can read and chant scriptures for the families who previously asked their respected *bla ma* or tantric practitioner to chant based on annual divination results. Years ago, only monks chanted scriptures for families. Holding rituals and chanting scriptures became more expensive, so many families only invited monks to chant scriptures if it was too complex for local young people. However, some wealthier families continued inviting monks to chant scriptures, believing the results were better.

Cell phones and cars have added new aspects to this situation. Even though young people love these new things, they also want to or are being asked to maintain their traditions. Local rituals are critical to maintaining traditions, and youth familiar with using technology are challenged to maintain local rituals enthusiastically.

The difficult truth is that many rituals and traditions may disappear. With communal activities becoming less frequent and the appeal of a quickly changing world driven by new technology like AI, finding time to hold rituals becomes more challenging. There is a real threat to continuing these cultural practices. The younger generation is at a crossroads between the excitement of a new, fast-paced society and the responsibility to protect traditions and knowledge from their ancestors.

In navigating this delicate balance, will the younger generation see how important it is to keep local culture alive? While the modern world offers many conveniences and new things, will connecting tradition and evolution be seen as important? Finding new and creative ways to bring rituals into today's world might be encouraged by using digital platforms or adjusting them to fit changing society. For example, the central idea of the annual Gter sgrub ritual was for locals to understand



and appreciate the importance of the earth and embrace thanksgiving as they participated for the sake of peace with the *sa bdag* 'landlord' and thus achieve more benefits from the earth.

Building a sense of community and shared responsibility is crucial. Permanent settlements and fewer social interactions make this challenging. Encouraging ritual participation strengthens a sense of community.

In essence, Lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal represents global changes with old traditions struggling against the forces of modernization. The younger generation must find new ways to blend tradition with the future, not just to cherish and protect their culture. A culture's true strength lies in this delicate balance – the ability to change without forgetting its roots. As we stand between tradition and progress, the challenge is to retain knowledge of the past while moving forward into an unknown future, armed with the wisdom of our ancestors and the courage to embrace change.

## REFERENCES

- Pad+ma rig 'dzin བཤམ་རིག་འཛིན།. 2021. An Mdo ba sa ga zla ba Festival: Yo lag Tibetan Community. *Asian Highland Perspectives* 60:47-73. <https://www.academia.edu/52755035/>, accessed 1 December 2023.
- Cabezón, José Ignacio (ed). 2010. *Tibetan Ritual*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las འུང་དཀར་བློ་བཟང་འཕྱིན་ལས།. 2002. *Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo* འུང་དཀར་ཆེག་མཛོད་ཆེན་མོ། [*Dongar Dictionary*]. Beijing 北京: Zhongguo zangxue chubanshe 中国藏学出版社 [China Tibetology Press].
- Hor gtsang 'jigs med ཧོར་གཙང་འཇིགས་མེད་ 2009. *Mdo smad lo rgyus chen mo* མཛོད་མཐོང་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ཆེན་མོ། [*Big History of Mdo smad*], Volume 6. Bod kyi dpe mdzod khañ བོད་བྱིད་དཔེ་མཛོད་ཁང་། [Library of Tibet].
- Nian Zhihai 年治海 and Bai Gengdeng 白更登 (eds). 1993. *Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian* 青海藏传佛教寺院明鉴 [*The Clear Mirror of Tibetan Buddhist*

*Monasteries in Qinghai*]. Lanzhou 兰州: Gansu minzu chubanshe 甘肃民族出版社 [Gansu Nationalities Press].

Sangjie Zhaxi [Sangs rgyas bkra shis སངས་རྒྱལ་མཆོག་ཤིས་ཀྱི་ཤེ།]. 2019. No Receiving Without Giving: A mdo Tibetan Stong mchod 'Thousand-fold Offering' Practices. *Asian Highland Perspectives* 58:14-78.

<https://www.academia.edu/42079604/>, accessed 1 December 2023

Zlog pa grub chen las kyi rdo rje ལྷོག་པ་གུབ་ཆེན་ལས་ཀྱི་རྡོ་རྗེ། nd. *Gdugs dkar mchog grub ma bzhugs so གདུགས་དཀར་མཆོག་གུབ་མ་བཞུགས་སོ།* [The White Parasol].

## TIBETAN TERMS

'ba' cha འབའ་ཆ།

'dge 'dun chos 'phel slob'bring དགེ་འདུན་ཆོས་འཕེལ་སྒོལ་འབྲིང་།

'dzam gling འཛམ་གླིང་།

'bo ra འབོ་ར།

'dzam gling ge sar rgyal po འཛམ་གླིང་གེ་སར་རྒྱལ་པོ།

'dzam gling spyi bsang འཛམ་གླིང་སྤྱི་བསང་།

'grig འགྲིག་

'jigs byed འཇིགས་བྱེད་།

a khu dpon ཨ་ཁུ་དཔོན་།

a khu dpon tshe ring rnam rgyal ཨ་ཁུ་དཔོན་ཆེ་རིང་རྣམ་རྒྱལ་།

a myes gur ཨ་མེས་གུར་།

a myes gyag smying ཨ་མེས་གཡག་སྟིང་།

a myes rdza rgan ཨ་མེས་རྩ་རྒྱན་།

a myes ri rgan ཨ་མེས་རི་རྒྱན་།

a myes shug rgan ཨ་མེས་ཤུག་རྒྱན་།

a myes skyer lung ཨ་མེས་སྟེར་ལུང་།

a rga rta lo ཨ་རྒ་རྟ་ལོ།

aja' dbyangs dphal ldan འཇམ་དབྱངས་དཔལ་ལྷན་།

b+ha b+ha བ་མ།

ba kha བ་ཁ།

ba ma བ་མ།

bad+ma rig 'dzin བ་ད་མ་རིག་འཛིན་།

bon rgya བོན་རྒྱ།

bka' 'gyur བཀའ་འགྲུར་།

bla ma བླ་མ།

bla ma'i gsol 'debs བླ་མའི་གསོལ་འདེབས།

blo bzang 'phrin las lung rtogs rgya mtsho ལྷོ་བཟང་འཕྲིན་ལས་ལུང་རྟོགས་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

blo bzang 'phrin las rgya mtsho ལྷོ་བཟང་འཕྲིན་ལས་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

blo bzang bstan pa'i rgya mtsho ལྷོ་བཟང་བསྟན་པའི་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

blo bzang chos grags rgya mtsho ལྷོ་བཟང་ཆོས་གྲགས་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

bod rtsis བོད་རྟེན།

bsam gtan rin chen,  
sanmudan renqi

བསམ་གཏན་རིན་ཆེན།

bsam yas gtsug lag khang བསམ་ཡས་གཙུག་ལག་ཁང་།

bsang བསང་།

bsang khri བསང་ཁྲི།

bsang khug བསང་ཁུག་།

bsang rdzas ril bu བསང་རྩས་རིལ་བུ།

bsang rtsi བསང་རྩི།

bskang ba བསྐང་བ།

bsngo ba dang smon lam བསྟོ་བ་དང་སྟོན་ལམ།

bstan 'dzin 'jigs med skal ldan dpal bzang

བསྟན་འཛིན་འཇིགས་མེད་སྐལ་ལྷན་དཔལ་བཟང་།

bstod བསྟོད།

bstod smon phyogs bsgrigs བསྟོད་སྟོན་ཕྱོགས་བརྒྱུགས།

bzhi ba'i smyung gnas བཞི་བའི་སྦྱང་གནས།

cho ga ཆོག་།

chos kyi sngon ma skyabs 'gro, zas kyi sngon ma mchod kha

ཆོས་ཀྱི་སྟོན་མ་སྐབས་འགྲོ། ཟས་ཀྱི་སྟོན་མ་མཚོད་ལ།

chos rje don grub rin chen, Chöjé Döndrup Rinchen ཆོས་རྗེ་དོན་གྲུབ་རིན་ཆེན།

chos skyong ཆོས་སྟོང་།

chos skyong gi bsang ཆོས་སྟོང་གི་བསང་།

chub ཐུབ།

g.yang 'bod གཡང་འབོད།

dge 'dun 'phrin las rab rgyas དགེ་འདུན་འཕྱན་ལས་རབ་རྒྱལ།

dge 'dun chos 'phel དགེ་འདུན་ཆོས་འཕེལ།

dge lugs དགེ་ལུགས།

dgu chu དགུ་ཅུ།

dkar དཀར།

dkar gsum དཀར་གསུམ།

dkar gtor དཀར་གཏོར།

dkar phyogs དཀར་ཕྱོགས།

dkar zas དཀར་ཟས།

dkon mchog gsum དཀོན་མཆོག་གསུམ།

dpon དཔོན།

dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las

དུང་དཀར་བློ་བཟང་འཕྱན་ལས།

dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo དུང་དཀར་ཆོག་མཚོད་ཆེན་མོ།

dus bzang ཏུས་བཟང་།

dus chen ཏུས་ཆེན།

g.yang 'bod གཡང་འབོད།

gad dmar གད་དམར།

gad dmar thang གད་དམར་ཐང་།

gter གཏེར།

gter sgrub གཏེར་སྦྱབ།

gyu rngog གཡུ་རྟོག

gzhi bdag གཞི་བདག་།

gzhi bdag gi bsang གཞི་བདག་གི་བསང་།

gzhis ka rtse གཞིས་ཀ་རྩེ།

gzhan gyi bla ma rts'i tog yin, rang gi bla ma me tog yin

གཞན་གྱི་བླ་མ་ཆེ་རྟོག་ཡིན། རང་གི་བླ་མ་མེ་རྟོག་ཡིན།

hor gtsang 'jigs med ཧྲར་གཙང་འཇིགས་མེད།	
ka me ཀ་མེ།	kha btags ཁ་བདགས།
kha rgya ཁ་རྒྱ།	khri srong lde btsan ཁྲི་སྟང་ལྡེ་བཙན།
lab tse ལ་བ་ཙེ།	lcags so ལྷགས་སོ།
lcags thar rgyal ལྷགས་ཐར་རྒྱལ།	lha sa ལྷ་ས།
lhu b+ha ལྷ་བ་ཧ།	lnga ba'i bzhi rgyal ལྷ་བའི་བཞི་རྒྱལ།
ma ra མ་ར།	mchod rtan མཚོད་རྟེན།
mdo མདོ།	mdo ba མདོ་བ།
mdo gdugs sgrol gsum མདོ་གདུགས་སྒྲོལ་གསུམ།	
mdo sde 'bum, Dodé Bum མདོ་སྡེ་འབུམ།	
mdo smad lo rgyus chen mo མདོ་སྐད་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ཆེན་མོ།	
mgo rgya མགོ་རྒྱ།	mgon po mtsho མགོན་པོ་མཚོ།
mngar gsum མངར་གསུམ།	mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྟོན།
nag phyogs ནག་ཕྱོགས།	
ngag dbang 'phrin las rgya mtsho ངག་དབང་འཕྲིན་ལས་རྒྱ་མཚོ།	
rdo rje རྡོ་རྗེ།	rdo rje tshe ring རྡོ་རྗེ་ཙེ་རིང་།
reb gong རེབ་གོང་།	rgya 'du རྒྱ་འདུ།
rgya ma རྒྱ་མ།	rgyan mchod རྒྱན་མཚོད།
rim gro རིམ་གྲོ།	rlung rta'i bsang རྩུང་རྟའི་བསང་།
rma lho རྩ་ལྷོ།	rong bo རོང་བོ།
rong bo bde chen chos 'khor gling རོང་བོ་བདེ་ཆེན་ཆོས་འཁོར་གླིང་།	
rta mgrin bzlog pa རྟ་མགིན་བཟླག་པ།	rta mgrin dbang rgyal རྟ་མགིན་དབང་རྒྱལ།
rta mgrin tshe brtan རྟ་མགིན་ཙེ་བརྟན།	
rta mgrin tshe ring རྟ་མགིན་ཙེ་རིང་།	rta b+he རྟ་ཞེ།
rta lo རྟ་ལོ།	rta ma རྟ་མ་ལ།
rtam kho རྟ་མ་ཁོ།	rtsam pa རྟ་མ་པ།
rtse khog རྟེ་ཁོག་།	rtsis ba རྟེས་བ།
rug རུག་།	ru khag རུ་ཁག་།
rug khral རུག་ཁྲལ་།	rug khya རུག་ཁྱ།
rus cha རུས་ཇ།	sa skya ས་སྐྱ།
sa gter ས་གཏིར།	sa bdag ས་བདག་།
Samten G Karmay, mkhar rme'u bsam gtan སའཛར་རྩེ་བསམ་གཏན།	
sems bskyed སེམས་བསྐྱེད།	sga ru སྐ་རུ།
sgro rong bo སྒྲོ་རོང་བོ།	sgro rong bo'i bsang khri སྒྲོ་རོང་བའི་བསང་ཁྲི།
	སྒྲོ་རོང་བའི་བསང་གྲི།
sgro tshang སྒྲོ་ཙང་།	sgrol dkar སྒྲོལ་དཀར།

sgrol dkar skyabs སྒོལ་དཀར་སྐྱབས།  
sgrol ma, Tara སྒོལ་མ།  
sgrol ma'i rlung rta སྒོལ་མའི་རྒྱང་རྟ།  
shar skyabs mgon skal ldan rgya mthso ཤར་སྐྱབས་མགོན་སྐལ་ལྷན་བླ་མཚོ།  
sher rtsig ཤེར་རྩིག  
shug rgan zho 'thung ཤུག་རྒྱན་ཞོ་འཐུང་།

sko lo སྐོ་ལོ།  
skyabs 'gro སྐྱབས་འགོ།

skyabs mgon སྐྱབས་མགོན།  
su ru ལུ་རུ།  
thun rin ཐུན་རིན།  
tshe go ཨེ་གོ།  
tshe ring skyid ཨེ་རིང་སྐུཏི།  
tsho ba ཨེ་བ།  
tsong kha ba ཨོང་ཁ་བ།  
yab rje bla ma shar skyabs mgon skal ldan rgya mtsho

ཡབ་རྩེ་བླ་མ་ཤར་སྐྱབས་མགོན་སྐལ་ལྷན་བླ་མཚོ།

yi dam skad gcig drung skyed ཡི་དམ་སྐད་གཅིག་བྱང་སྐུད།  
yo lag ཡོ་ལག

sgrol kho སྒོལ་ཁོ།  
sgrol ma mtsho སྒོལ་མ་མཚོ།  
sha bo ཤ་བོ།  
shu rgan lab tse ཤུག་རྒྱན་ལབ་ཙེ།  
skal bzang rgya mtsho

སྐལ་བཟང་བླ་མཚོ།  
rkung bu རུང་བུ།  
skyabs 'gro sems bskyed

སྐྱབས་འགོ་མཆོས་བསྐྱེད།  
stong mchod ལྷོང་མཚོད།  
ta len ཏ་ལེན།  
tos ཏོས།  
tshe lug ཨེ་ལུག  
tsho 'du ཨེ་དུ།  
tsho bzhi ཨེ་བཞི།

## CHINESE TERMS

bai 白  
dui 队  
Gashenzi 瓜什则  
jin 斤  
Nian Zhihai 年治海  
Sangjie Zhaxi 桑杰扎西  
Tongren 同仁

dadui 大队  
Duowa 多哇  
Huangnan 黄南  
Lanzhou 兰州  
Qinghai 青海  
Sumudan Renqin  
叁木丹仁青

LNGA MCHOD 'GANDEN OFFERING OF THE  
TWENTY-FIFTH DAY' IN MDO BA (DUOWA),  
THUN RIN (REB GONG, TONGREN) CITY, MTHO  
SNGON (QINGHAI) PROVINCE, PR CHINA<sup>1</sup>  
Pad+ma rig 'dzin པད་མ་རིག་འཛིན། (Wanmerenzeng 完么仁增)

ABSTRACT

The history of Mdo ba (Duowa) Monastery, an introduction to Dga' ldan lnga mchod<sup>2</sup> 'Ganden Offering of the Twenty-Fifth Day' and its rituals practiced in the monastery and local communities, and a model for recording and preserving endangered religious activities, cultural practices, social gatherings, and traditions in a rapidly changing society, are given in the context of Mdo ba Town, Thun rin (Reb gong, Tongren) City, Mtho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China.

KEYWORDS

Dga' ldan lnga mchod, *ganden ngamchoe*, Mdo ba (Duowa), Mtsho sngon (Qinghai), Thun rin (Reb gong), Tibetan cultural preservation

INTRODUCTION

Mdo ba 'brog dgon pa mdo sngags dar rgyas gling 'The Secluded Monastery of Mdo ba: the Sutra and Mantra Propagation Center' is in the lap of a hill above Mdo ba Township Town, ninety-seven kilometers east of Reb gong (Thun rin, Tongren) Town. Monks

---

<sup>1</sup> Pad+ma+ma rig 'dzin པད་མ་རིག་འཛིན། (Wanmarenzeng 完么仁增). 2024. Lnga mchod 'Ganden Offering of the Twenty-Fifth Day' in Mdo ba (Duowa), Thun rin (Reb gong, Tongren) City, Mtho sngon (Qinghai) Province, China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:77-105.

<sup>2</sup> Names for this festival in English include Butter Lamp Festival, which may be a translation of the Chinese term Randeng Jie 燃灯节. The Tibetan term is Ganden Ngamchoe. In this article, I refer to it as Lnga mchod, a short form for Dga' ldan lnga mchod. This short form is the term locals most often use.

lived in black yak-hair tents around 1915 and earlier and moved seasonally with Mdo ba herding families. At this time, locals referred to the monastery as Ra sgar 'Black Yak-hair Tent Monastery'. Gcod le (1937-2024) recalled:

Because of thievery, robbing, and invasions from communities outside Mdo ba, Ra sgar had no permanent location and followed Mdo ba families seasonally from winter pasture to summer pasture, then from autumn pasture to winter pasture. Later, monks dug pits inside their tents and settled about five kilometers west of [the contemporary] Mdo ba Town Center, known as Klad rko. The pits were warm and neat. During this time, monks living in black yak-hair tents didn't observe strict discipline like contemporary monks. In my childhood, monks wore *wa gor* 'fox-fur hats' during winter.

Nian and Bai (1993:164) reported 1915 as Ra sgar's founding.<sup>1</sup> In 1954, the tenth PaN chen Bla ma (1938-1989) chose the location of Mdo ba Monastery through divination. Locals built adobe temples the next year. Until 1958, there was an Assembly Hall and a Protector Hall with around eighty rooms and a total of about 600 rooms in thirty courtyards for monks in an area of 19.2 mu.<sup>2</sup> There were sixty monks in the monastery. The monastery had 500 horses, 3,000 yaks, and 6,000 sheep and re-opened for religious activities in June 1987. Dge 'dun rgya mtsho (1904-?) managed all monastic events from 1954 to 1958.

Sman tog (b. 1929-1990) was a local monk and monastery manager in the 1990s. There were thirty-six monks in Mdo ba Monastery in 1991, of whom thirty-four had recently become monks. Four had attended the local primary school. Rebuilding an Assembly Hall with twenty rooms, a *nang chen*<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> It is likely there was a community of religious practitioners including the Sa skya, Bka' gyud, and Bka' gdams schools; and Tantric and Bon practitioners, but I have found no resources to support this.

<sup>2</sup> A Chinese *mu* equals 0.067 hectares.

<sup>3</sup> A *bla ma*'s house. His monk assistants typically run the house, receive guests and manage the *bla ma*'s property.

(FIGs. 11-1;2) with ninety-one rooms, and about thirty rooms in six courtyards for monks took place in the 1990s.

According to Reb gong pa 'jigs med bsam grub (2013:528-33) and Ri khrod pa dge 'dun bstan pa (nd:182-184), local monk Dge 'dun rgya mtsho (born in Khyi rnga Community) received a *dge bshes* degree from Bla brang Monastery,<sup>1</sup> returned home, and began building new monastery buildings for monks living in Ra sgar in 1956. The eighty monks in the monastery began observing strict monastic discipline entailing the study and memorization of scriptures. They were also forbidden to leave the monastery without permission from the disciplinarian, and participation in chanting in the assembly hall was required.

The Peaceful Liberation of Tibet (1951) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) disrupted religious practice in Mdo ba Monastery from 1958 to 1980 with monks becoming laymen. Dge 'dun rgya mtsho did not return home after imprisonment, and locals lost contact with him.

In 1981, Skal bzang bstan 'dzin<sup>2</sup> (1929-1990) and Brtson 'grus<sup>3</sup> (1923-2001) began rebuilding Mdo ba Monastery,

---

<sup>1</sup> Bla brang Monastery is located in nearby Xiahe County, Kan su'u (Gansu) Province.

<sup>2</sup> Known locally as Sman tog (1929-1990), he was born in Kha skya Community, took monastic vows at the age of eight, lived in Mdo ba Monastery until he was nineteen, and then studied Buddhist scriptures and Tibetan medicine at Rong bo Monastery. He worked in the Tibetan Medicine Hospital of Rma lho (Huangnan) in 1967 and as a *rkang rjen sman pa* 'barefoot doctor' in 1969. In 1981, he assumed responsibility for rebuilding Mdo ba Monastery, completed in 1985. In the following year, he donated his medicines and medical instruments to the monastery. He began building a clinic benefitting residents and patients from Rtse khog (Zeku) and the Bla brang (Xiahe) areas. See the online article by the Tibetan Medicine Hospital, Rongwo Monastery ([https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MzkwMjY1OTQzNg==&mid=2247487368&idx=2&sn=6c826f9a21ca61f9ccbccabb1083c894&source=41#wechat\\_redirect](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzkwMjY1OTQzNg==&mid=2247487368&idx=2&sn=6c826f9a21ca61f9ccbccabb1083c894&source=41#wechat_redirect), accessed 11 August 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Local monk, Lhag bsam (b. 1968) said:



constructed a new twelve-*gyan*<sup>1</sup> sized temple (FIG. 9) that held several *sman sku*<sup>2</sup> of Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), (see FIG. 10-5) Rgyal tshab dar ma rin chen (1364-1432),<sup>3</sup> and Mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang<sup>4</sup> (1385-1438); a wall painting of *lam rim tshogs zhing*;<sup>5</sup> and scriptures including the *Bka' 'gyur* and *Bstan 'gyur*. Afterward, the number of monastery monks gradually increased in number.

---

Brtson 'grus was born in Khyi lnga and was the brother of Tshe dpa's (b. 1963) mother (Sgrol dkar, b. 1937). He and Sman tog were the only monks among seventy to eighty who kept their vows during the Cultural Revolution. Brtson 'grus was a knowledgeable monk. During the Cultural Revolution he was a *zhwa gon* 'person wearing a hat' [certain Cultural Revolution victims were forced to wear paper 'dunce' hats while they were criticized in front of a crowd] and worked serving Mdo ba Township officers making bridles, saddle blankets, pads, and so on. He contributed his life and skills to rebuilding the monastery after it was reopened, along with the highly respected monk physician, Sman tog.

<sup>1</sup> One *gyan* equals about fifteen square meters.

<sup>2</sup> Images made of gold, silver, copper, iron, brass, and zinc - six medicinal metals.

<sup>3</sup> Tsong kha pa's student, the first Dga' ldan khri pa 'Goden Throne Holder' of the Dge lugs tradition after Tsong kha pa's death, and a prolific writer (<https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Gelug>, accessed 12 August 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Born in Central Tibet, he took novice ordination at the age of seven and became one of Tsong kha pa's most devoted disciples in 1407. In 1431, he assumed the Golden Throne. He died in 1438 and was posthumously designated the First PaN chen bla ma as a pre-incarnation of the Fourth PaN chen, Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1570-1662),

(<https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Khedrubje-Gelek-Pelzang/8027>, accessed 12 August 2024).

<sup>5</sup> The *tshogs zhing* 'field of the accumulation of merit' visualizes a root guru whose lineage or religious order has originated as its main figure and who is considered fully divine. (See Tshogs zhing: A Wall Painting in the New 'Du khang of Spituk (dPe thub)

[https://www.academia.edu/9907766/Tshogs\\_zhing\\_a\\_wall\\_painting\\_in\\_the\\_new\\_Du\\_khang\\_of\\_Spituk\\_dPe\\_thub\\_pdf](https://www.academia.edu/9907766/Tshogs_zhing_a_wall_painting_in_the_new_Du_khang_of_Spituk_dPe_thub_pdf), accessed 31 July 2024).

■ ■ ■

According to locals, the container for burning a butter lamp is a *rkong bu* or *mchod kong*. However, people usually refer to the cup according to its material. If the cup is made of silver or brass, it is called *dngul rkong* or *zangs rkong*. A *phye rkong* is a cup made of wheat flour dough (my translation: 'dough-ghee burner') that is offered during the night of the Lnga mchod on the twenty-fifth day of the tenth lunisolar month, commemorating Tsong kha pa's nirvana.

This is the scene of offering countless butter lamps on both roofs and yards of temples on the night of Tsong kha pa's nirvana, according to the most well-known biography of the master by his close disciple Mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang (1385-1438), the third abbot of Dga' ldan Monastery:

At that time, countless butter lamps were offered in the direction of or facing the master's chapel on the roof eaves of the monastery's rooms. The flames of great rows of butter lamps lit the square in front of the chapel and the assembly hall, free from wind (Mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang 2018:120-1).

Another detailed description is provided by the major Dge lugs historian Dbal mang paN+Di ta Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan (1764-1853) in his history of Lba brang Monastery in 1800 (1987:275):

After Tsong kha pa's nirvana, his two chief students promoted new rules promoting the good deeds of Tsong kha pa, not allowing people to mourn him like laymen, and monks whose hair was longer than the width of a finger [had their hair] burned with lit joss sticks. The custom of burning monks' hair continued to be practiced during the Butter Lamp Festival.

During the second year of the Butter Lamp Festival, in a significant event for the Dge lugs School, Mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang was appointed as [Dda' ldan] monastery's disciplinarian by Rgal tshab dar ma rin chen (1364-1432). Afterward, it was a

tradition for monasteries to appoint their disciplinarians during the Butter Lamp Festival, symbolizing the growth and spread of the Dge lugs School. For example, this great monastery [Bla brang] appointed its disciplinarian during the day of the Lnga mchod according to the tradition of Tsong kha pa's two chief students [Rgyal tshab dar ma rin chen and Mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang]. The disciplinarian also gave a talk about discipline and instructions.

This example illustrates Dge lugs monasteries accepting, developing, and disseminating Lnga mchod in Tibet, including Mdo ba Monastery. Mdo ba residents have been holding the tradition from Ra sgar's beginnings in 1915 to new monastic buildings and the monastery's reopening in the 1980s to the present.

The death of local elders and few recordings of the past have resulted in murky contemporary understandings of former times. Certain senior monks and elders do remember what they experienced in early childhood. For example, a local senior monk provided information about Mdo ba Monastery:

On the night of the Butter Lamp Festival, local monks pitched black yak hair tents and meeting tents as their accommodation and chanting areas. Monks offered butter lamps made of flour dough. After offering the butter lamps, the monastery *dge g.yog pa* 'assistant' and abbot walked around the tents of local families to check if the herding families had offered butter lamps. Families that had offered butter lamps carried lit *phye rkong* in a wooden basin and circumambulated their black yak hair tents and livestock. Monks scolded those who did not offer butter lamps.

At that time, *rkong bu* were too expensive for many to obtain. Consequently, some skilled locals made *rkong bu* of *sa dmar* 'red earth' and flour dough. The latter were commonly used during the night of the Butter Lamp Festival. I recall that after the reopening of our monastery, monks still made *phye rkong* and offered butter lamps in old *rkong bu* on windowsills. The disciplinarian and his two *chab ril* 'assistants' walked inside the monastery, monitoring monks

offering butter lamps on their windowsills. This monitoring is known as *gling nyug* 'Tour of the Monastery'.

The locals' economic conditions gradually improved, so they bought *rkong bu* and margarine, increasing the number and variety of butter lamps offered. Butter lamps of varying sizes and patterns were offered in front of the Assembly Hall and its yard.

On the morning of the twenty-fifth day, monks paraded clockwise around the monastery's exoteric circumambulation path holding *mchod rdzas* 'offering substances'. Locals approached the monastery in the early morning and observed the monk parade known as *ser phreng* 'procession of monks'.

Lhag bsam offered more details:

At the very beginning, monks made a large *lha bshos* 'divine food' (see FIG. 1-1; 2;3) featuring butter colored white, yellow, blue, and red and other offering substances known as *chu gnyis nyer spyod* 'two water offerings' (FIG. 6), chanting *Rje'i stong mchod* 'Thousand Fold Offerings to Master Tsong kha pa'.<sup>1</sup> After a while, monks wearing *chos gos* 'Dharma robes' circumambulated the Assembly Hall. With the number of monks increasing, we walked clockwise around the exoteric path of our monastery chanting *Spyan ras khrus gsol* 'Cleansing Ritual of Avalokiteshvara' in the four directions.<sup>2</sup> Ritual instruments also increased in number - parasols, victory banners, pillar hangings, peacock feather parasols, drums, cymbals, and conch shells - along with the number of monks.

In 2006, we had our new *gos sku* 'brocade Buddha image' and sunned it annually during the Butter Lamp Festival. The process of inviting Buddha images imitated Rong bo Monastery's *ser phreng* during its Great Prayer Festival. Following the monk parade, a line of benefactors carried the Buddha image on their shoulders, and

---

<sup>1</sup> For more see:

[https://tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=The\\_T\\_housand\\_Offerings\\_to\\_Lama\\_Tsongkhapa](https://tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=The_T_housand_Offerings_to_Lama_Tsongkhapa), accessed 31 July 2024.

<sup>2</sup> They stopped at each direction of the monastery and chanted the cleansing ritual as they circumambulated the monastery.

monks lined up orderly (see FIG. 3). Two monks played *tsi* 'Tibetan trumpets' and slowly led the monk team. The disciplinarian's assistant held a wooden rod in his right hand and walked in front of the disciplinarian, who held a dragon-headed wooden stick for burning joss sticks. They were followed by the abbot, senior monks holding lit joss sticks, and younger monks carrying parasols. Next were victory banner holders. Another group of monks beat drums as they walked, and a monk sounded a *dung dkar g.yas* 'khyil 'right-turning white conch' while leading a group of monks who also sounded white conches (see FIG.2-1;2;3).

In 2024, there were around sixty monks in Mdo ba Monastery. Ordinary locals may practice *smjung gnas* 'fasting' on this special day and visit the monastery around eight a.m. to watch *ser phreng*. In the following years, a large crowd of local people worshiped the Buddha image and listened to religious lectures given by the reincarnation of the founder of the local monastery, the Second Dge 'dun rgya mtsho (born in Sdong nge village in 1968; see FIG. 9), who played an important role among monks and laymen and occasionally giving religious lectures to local people. He led senior monks of Mdo ba Monastery to plan an expansion of the Mgon khang 'Protector's Hall' in 2022 and began reconstruction in 2023 with financial support from local families. There are several bronze images and four wall paintings in the new Protector's Hall, including the main figure: Rdo rje 'jigs byed 'Vajrabhairva', Dpal ldan Lha mo 'Shri Devi', Dam can chos rgyal 'Samaya-bound Dharmaraja', Mgon po 'Mahākāla', and Rnam sras 'Vaisravana', with wall paintings of Lha mo, Dam can chos rgyal, Mahākāla, and Vaisravana scheduled for completion in mid-2024 (see FIG.10-1;2;3;4).

After returning from the monastery, locals (mostly women) busily made *phye rkong*. However, after 2015, they mostly offered butter lamps in metal *rkong bu*. Few *phye rkong* were offered. A few families made *phye rkong* to maintain the tradition. For example, my aunt, Lcags thar skyid (b. 1970), offered butter lamps in both *phye rkong* and *rkong bu*. Lit butter

lamps in basins were carried as they circumambulated their living areas, exposing the light of the butter lamps to their livestock while loudly chanting the Six Sacred Syllables and Tshong kha pa praise verses.

The following morning, *phye rkong* were baked in ashes of dry yak dung from stoves and offered to children to eat. Children used to visit neighbors to receive *phye rkong* and brought them home to eat. My father (Chos ko, b. 1963) recalled neighbor families gave baked *phye rkong* to children who visited each of the neighbor families.

I ate baked *phye rkong* at home during my childhood in the 1990s. Images of lighting butter lamps in *phye rkong* and then eating burnt, baked *phye rkong* the next morning are memories that will never fade.

## CONCLUSION

*Lnga mchod* entails offering butter lamps to commemorate Tsong kha pa, which has been practiced in Tibetan areas for centuries. My home area, a small herding community, also observes this tradition.

If local schools gave primary school students time to celebrate local celebrations with their families, it would encourage the continuation of such traditions and help maintain a sense of community, appreciation, and understanding of cultural history.

## PHOTOGRAPHS

FIG. 1-1 Butter flowers (2016, Mdo ba Monastery, Rab brtan).



FIG. 1-2 Bsod nams blo gros (b. 1999) creates butter decorations (2023, Mdo ba Monastery, Bstan 'dzin mkhyen rab).





FIG. 1-3 Carrying divine food to the Assembly Hall (2016, Mdo ba Monastery, Rab brtan).



FIG. 2-1 *Ser phreng*: the lead monk is the *dge g.yog pa* 'disciplinarian's assistant', holding a white wood stick. The second monk is a disciplinarian who holds a dragon-headed wood stick for burning joss sticks (2016, Mdo ba Monastery, Rab gtan).



FIG. 2-2 *Ser phreng*: the second and fifth monks hold the *rma bya'i sgro gur* 'peacock feather parasol', and monks near the white stupa hold parasols (2016, Mdo ba Monastery, Rab gtan).





FIG. 2-3 *Ser phreng*: the first monk holds a *tsi* 'Tibetan trumpet' (2016, Mdo ba Monastery, Rab brtan).



FIG. 3 Inviting the Buddha image (2016, Mdo ba Monastery, Rab brtan).



FIG. 4 Sunning the Buddha (2021, Mdo ba Monastery, anonymous).



FIG 5. Mdo ba people worship the Buddha image (2016, Mdo ba Monastery, Rab gtan).





FIG. 6 *Chu gnyis nyer spyod* 'two water offerings' (2022, Rong bo Monastery, Sbyin pa rgya mtsho).



FIG. 7 *Phye skong* 'dough-ghee burners' (2021, Yo lag Village, Gcod pa 'tsho).



FIG. 8 Offering butter lamps in the Rong bo Monastery Assembly Hall yard (2021, Reb gong, Pad+ma rig 'dzin).



FIG. 9 The temple was the first Assembly Hall after reopening the monastery in the 1980s. There was a new Assembly Hall below the temple in 2000; the old one became the Protector's Hall. The first monk holding the shovel was the second Dge 'dun rgya mtsho (b. 1968), and the second was Bstan 'dzin mkhyen rab (b. early 2000s); the standing monk behind the iron shovel holder is Dge bzang (b. early 2000s); the monk by the incense offering plate is Thogs med (b. 1962); and the monk standing by the concrete cart is Yig g.nyen (b. 1962). They made the ground flat to build a new incense offering (2023, Mdo ba Monastery, Bsam gtan).





FIG. 10-1 New Protector's Hall (2024, Mdo ba Monastery, Pad+ma rig 'dzin).

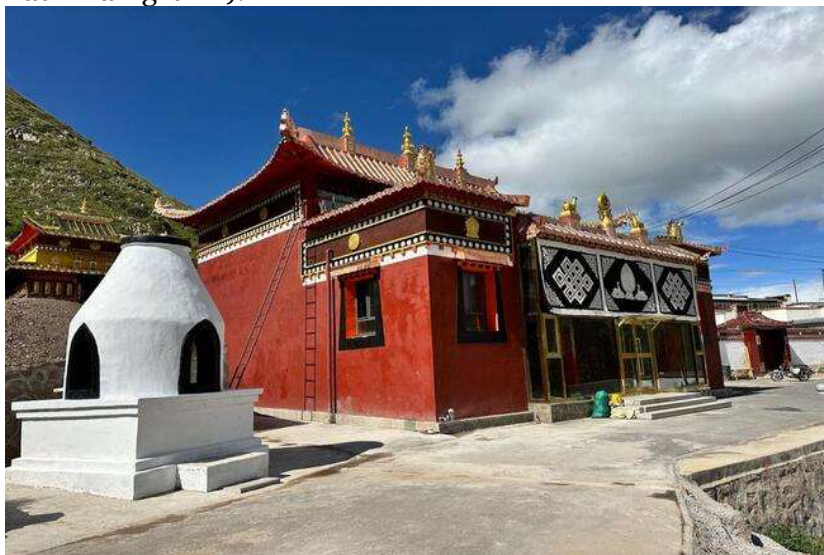


FIG. 10-2 Metal images in the new Protector's Hall. From left to right: Mgon po 'Mahākāla', Rdo rje 'jigs byed 'Vajrabhairva', and Dam can chos rgyal 'Samaya-bound Dharmaraja'. Dpal ldan lha mo 'Shri Devi' was to be placed in front of the middle image in September 2024. The opening ceremony was planned for the eighth month of the Chinese lunar calendar (2024, Mdo ba Monastery, Pad+ma rig 'dzin).



FIG. 10-3 Mgon po 'Mahākāla' (2024, Mdo ba Monastery, Pad+ma rig 'dzin).





FIG. 10-4 Dam can chos rgyal 'Samaya-bound Dharmaraja'  
(2024, Mdo ba Monastery, Pad+ma rig 'dzin).



FIG. 10-5 Rje Tsong kha pa (2024, Mdo ba Monastery, Pad+ma rig 'dzin).





FIG. 10-6 Lha mo 'Shri Devi': principal Buddhist protector and main image housed in the Protectot's Hall (2024, Mdo ba Monastery, Lhag bsam).



FIG. 11-1 Khyi Inga Village sponsored construction of the PaN chen gzims shag 'Panchen's chamber' to invite the tenth PaN chen bla ma to Mdo ba Monastery. Construction was completed in 1990 after the PaN chen passed away. The building in the picture was rebuilt around 2010 (2024, Mdo ba Monastery, Pad+ma rig 'dzin).



FIG. 11-2 The Nang chen courtyard (2024, Mdo ba Monastery, Pad+ma rig 'dzin).





## REFERENCES

- Dbal mang paN+Di ta Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan དབལ་མང་པ་དྲི་ཏ་དགོན་མཚན་གྱི་མཚན།. 1987. *Bla brang bkra' shis 'khyil gyi gdan rabs lha'i rnga chen* ལྷ་བྲང་བླ་ཤིས་འཁྱིལ་གྱི་གདན་རབས་ལྷ་འོ་རྩ་ཆེན། [*A Great Divine Drum of Bla brang Monastery History*]. Lanzhou 兰州: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang ཀན་སུ་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྱུན་ཁང། (Gansu minzu chubanshe 甘肃民族出版社) [Gansu Nationalities Press].
- Mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang མཁས་གྲུབ་དགེ་ལེགས་དཔལ་བཟང།. 2018. *Rje tsong kha ba'i rnam thar dad pa'i 'jug ngogs* རྗེ་ཙོང་ཁ་བའི་རྣམ་ཐར་དང་པའི་འབྲུག་འགྲེལ། [*Entryway of Faith: Tsongkhapa's Biography*]. Lha sa ལྷ་ས།: 'Bras spungs bkra shis sgo mang dpe mdzod khang འབྲས་སྤངས་བླ་ཤིས་སྐོམ་མང་དཔེ་མཛོད་ཁང། [Drepung Tashi Gomang Library].
- Nian Zhihai 年治海 and Bai Gengdeng 白更登 (eds). 1993. *Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian* 青海藏传佛教寺院明鉴 [*The Clear Mirror of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in Qinghai*]. Lanzhou 兰州: Gansu minzu chubanshe 甘肃民族出版社 [Gansu Nationalities Press].
- Reb gong pa 'jigs med bsam grub རེབ་གོང་པ་འཇིགས་མེད་བསམ་གྲུབ།. 2013. *Mdo smad reb gong lo rgyus chen mo ngo mtshar gtam gyi bang mdzod* མདྲ་སྐད་རེབ་གོང་ལོ་རྒྱལ་ཆེན་མོ་ངོ་མཚན་གཏམ་གྱི་བང་མཛོད། [*The Great History of Mdo smad Reb gong: Treasury of Mysterious Tales*]. 2013. Pe cin པེ་ཅིན།: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang gi bod yig rtsom sgrig khang མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྱུན་ཁང་གི་བོད་ཡིག་ཚོམ་སྒྲིག་ཁང། [Nationalities Publishing House Tibetan Editorial Office].
- Ri khrod pa dge 'dun bstan pa རི་ཁྲོད་པ་དགེ་འདུན་བསྐྱུན་པ།. nd. *Mdo ba khyi lnga'i rus mdzod sngon byung gtam gyi yang zhun* མདྲ་བ་ཀྱི་ལྷ་པོ་རུས་མཛོད་སྔགས་ལྷུང་གྲམ་གྱི་ཡང་ཞུན། [*The History of Mdo ba khyi lnga Clan Members*]. Zhang kang རང་ཀང། [Hong Kong]: Zhang kang rta mchog dpe skrun khang རང་ཀང་རྟ་མཚན་དཔེ་སྐྱུན་ཁང། [Hong Kong Horse Publishing House].

## TIBETAN TERMS

'du khang འདུཁང་།  
bka' 'gyur བཀའ་འགྱུར།  
bka' gdams བཀའ་གདམས།  
bka' rgyud བཀའ་རྒྱུད།  
bla brang བླ་བར་།  
blo bzang chos kyi rgyal  
mtshan བློ་བཟང་ཚེས་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་མཚན།  
brtson 'grus བརྩན་འབྲས།  
bsod nams blo gros

བསོད་ནམས་བློ་གྲོས།  
bstan 'dzin mkhyen rab བསྟན་  
འཛིན་མཁྱེན་རབ།  
bstan 'gyur བསྟན་འགྱུར།

btson 'grus བརྩན་འབྲས།  
chab ril ཇམ་རིལ།  
chos gos ཚས་གོས།  
chu gnyis nyer spyod

ཐུ་གཉིས་ཉེར་སྟོད།  
dam chen chos rgyal  
དམ་ཆེན་ཚས་རྒྱ།

dga' ldan khri pa དགའ་ལྡན་ཁྲི་པ།  
dga' ldan lnga mchod;  
Ganden Ngamchoe

དགའ་ལྡན་ལྷ་མཚོ།  
dge 'dun rgya mtsho

དགེ་འདུན་གྲུ་མཚོ།  
dge bshes དགེ་བཤེས།  
dge bzang དགེ་བཟང་།  
dge g.yog pa དགེ་གཡོག་པ།

dge lugs དགེ་ལུགས།  
dngul rkong དངུལ་རྫོང་།  
dung dkar g.yas 'khyil

དུང་དཀར་གཡས་འབྲིལ།  
gcod le གཙོང་ལེ།  
gcod pa 'tsho གཙོང་པ་འཚོ།  
gling nyug གླིང་ལུག  
gos sku གོས་སུ།  
gyan གྲན།  
gzims shag གཟིམས་ཤག  
kha skya ཁ་སྐྱལ།  
khyi rnga ཀྱི་རྒྱ།  
klad rko ཀླད་རྫོ།  
lam rim tshogs zhing

ལམ་རིམ་ཚོགས་ཞིང་།  
lcags thar skyid ལཱགས་ཐར་སྦྱིད།  
lha bshos ལྷ་བཤོས།  
lha mo ལྷ་མོ།  
mchod kong མཚོང་རྫོང་།  
mdo ba མདོ་བ།

mdo ba 'brog dgon pa  
མདོ་བ་འབྲོག་དགོན་པ།  
mdo sngags dar rgyas gling

མདོ་སྔགས་དར་རྒྱས་གླིང་།  
mgon po མགོན་པོ།  
mkhas grub dge legs dpal  
bzang; Khedrup Rinpoche

མཁས་བླུ་དགེ་ལེགས་དཔལ་བཟང་།  
mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔག།  
nang chen ནང་ཆེན།  
paN chen bla ma པཎ་ཆེན་བླ་མ།  
phye rkong ཕྱེ་རྫོང་།

rab brtan རབ་བརྟན།  
rdo rje 'jigs byed རྩ་རྩེ་འཛིགས་བྱེད།  
reb gong རེབ་གོང་།  
rgyal tshab dar ma rin chen

རྒྱལ་ཚབ་དར་མ་རིན་ཆེན།  
rkang rjen sman pa རྟང་རྩེན་སྐམ་པ།  
rkong bu རྟང་བུ།

rma bya'i sgro gur ར་བཤེས་སྒོ་གུར།  
 rnam sras རྣམ་སྲས།  
 sa skya ས་སྐྱ།  
 sdong nge སྔ་ངེ།  
 sgrol dkar སྒོལ་དཀར།  
 sman tog སྐན་ཏོག།  
 spyan ras khros gsol སྤྱན་རས་གཟུངས་གསོལ།  
 thogs med ཐོགས་མེད།  
 tsong kha pa ཚོང་ཁ་པ།  
 lhag bsam ལྷག་བསམ།  
 wa gor ལ་གོར།  
 zangs rkong ཟངས་རྟོང་།

rma lho ར་ལྷོ།  
 rtse khog རེ་ཁོག།  
 sbyin pa rgya mtsho སྤྱིན་པ་རྒྱ་མཚོ།  
 ser phreng སེར་ཕྲེང་།  
 sman sku སྐན་སྐྱ།  
 smyung gnas སྐྱུང་གནས།  
 sti སྤེ།  
 tshe dpa' ཚེ་དཔའ།  
 thun rin ཐུན་རིན།  
 rong bo རོང་བོ།  
 dbyig gnyen དབྱིག་གཉེན།  
 zhwa gon ཞུ་གོན།

## CHINESE TERMS

Duowa 多哇  
 Gansu 甘肃  
 Huangnan 黄南  
 mu 亩  
 Qinghai 青海  
 Randeng Jie 燃灯节  
 Tongren 同仁  
 Xiahe 夏河  
 Zeku 泽库

# LINGUISTIC CORPUS DESIGN AS NEGOTIATION: A CASE STUDY OF KAZAKHSTANI GANSU DUNGAN<sup>1</sup>

Sami Honkasalo, University of Helsinki

Ular Nurlan and Zhamilya Abik, Nazarbayev University

## ABSTRACT

This study examines corpus design from the viewpoint of creating and using corpora for documenting and describing lesser-researched languages. Focusing primarily on Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan, a Sinitic contact variety spoken in Kazakhstan, we demonstrate that corpus design can be seen as a negotiation where the conflict between ideals and practical constraints influence the outcome. Corpus design is often teleological and represented as such retrospectively. At the same time, the process evolves under the pressures of external constraints, resulting in outcomes that do not necessarily fully align with the initial objectives. In this context, the paper discusses four methodological issues. For instance, while multilingual corpora have become more frequent, the current practices tend to presuppose clearly delineated languages where each corpus component can be labeled with an exclusive language code. This, however, fails to capture the 'fuzzy boundaries of languages' in actual communicative practices. Also, we argue that corpus design for lesser-researched languages, second language acquisition, and descriptive-documentative linguistics are intrinsically connected in a triangular relationship that is not considered sufficiently in earlier theory and practice.

## KEYWORDS

Dungan, Sinitic languages, corpus design, field linguistics,  
Central Asian minority languages

---

<sup>1</sup> Sami Honkasalo et al. 2025. Linguistic Corpus Design as Negotiation: A Case Study of Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:106-134.

## INTRODUCTION

The present section introduces the paper and its research objectives and defines the key terms and concepts in the following sections. The introduction concludes with an outline of the paper's structure and the linguistic conventions we follow in transcribing and representing Dungan.

## STUDY AIMS

This paper discusses corpus building as a tool for describing under-researched languages with often few available resources. Based on our ongoing research project on Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan, a Sinitic contact variety, and the authors' previous experience with language documentation and description, the paper argues that the creation of a linguistic corpus for such purposes is more accurately interpreted as a process of negotiation at the crossroads of the initial vision and adaptability into what comes up.

The discourse on corpora remains strongly teleological in a forward-looking sense: A linguistic need, such as documentation of a linguistic variety, is identified, and the created corpora, with its scope of materials, offer a solution to the issue. This, however, may be a mere 'backward projection'. As we will illustrate with Dungan, corpus design often evolves within the project's external constraints so that the end result crystallizes only *post factum*, frequently shaped even by serendipitous events.

Focusing on the concept of negotiation, this case study reveals four methodological issues, each of which are addressed in turn. To begin with, corpus design has focused on the representation and naturalness of the materials for a long time. In the case of lesser-researched languages, such demands may often have to be compromised to ascertain the project's feasibility. Also, the existing discourse and practice on corpus design runs the risk of downplaying the 'fuzzy boundaries of

languages' (see Weber and Horner 2012) and extracting idealized forms of languages. In terms of Dungan, many earlier descriptions of the language treat it largely as an 'ordinary' dialect of Mandarin (e.g., Lin 2012). Yet, our experience has shown that Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan has become a contact language intertwined with Russian, where separating borrowing, code-switching, and code-mixing remains a challenge and, in some cases, possibly an unfruitful task.

To address the issue, we propose the notion of a 'corpus of communicative activities.' Rather than trying to extract an essentialized ideal of a language, this approach, drawing from translanguaging theories, embraces the people's everyday discourse practices as the focal point. In other words, corpora can be constructed around communicative practices rather than around single differentiated and idealized languages. This approach is broadly applicable and particularly valuable in the multilingual context of Central Asia.

Furthermore, while *in situ* collection of language samples in corpus building is often voiced as the preferred approach, we argue that the distinction between *in situ* and *ex situ* collection is, in some instances, increasingly insignificant in our globalized world where mass migration is expected to increase further in the coming decades due to the global climate crisis.

Finally, as the last aim of this paper, we demonstrate that corpus design for fieldwork purposes, second language acquisition, and successful grammatical description are all intertwined and can be illustrated with a triangular model. This constitutes yet another difference in corpora for major languages and less-researched languages.

#### KEY TERMS

Dungan is a general term for Central Asian Sinitic Mandarin varieties spoken by Chinese-speaking Muslims in Central Asia. The varieties have approximately 110,000 speakers in total, and Ethnologue classifies Dungan as mid-sized and endangered

(Eberhard et al. 2022). Two main varieties of Dungan exist: Gansu and Shaanxi Dungan. Less in number, there are also speakers of several other Sinitic varieties in Central Asia included under the umbrella of Dungan by the local communities. This contrast between Gansu and Shaanxi Dungan traces back to the different geographical origins of the two Dungan groups. The linguistic and, to some extent, cultural differences between the two groups are noticeable, to the extent that speakers of different Dungan varieties often, but not always, use Russian as a lingua franca when communicating with one another. All examples discussed in this paper originate from Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan.

Dungan has a standardized written form based on the Gansu variety. Written Dungan differs from other written Sinitic varieties by using the Cyrillic alphabet, with no Chinese characters in use. Most Dungans lack even a passive familiarity of Chinese characters, and these characters are thus culturally alien in this Central Asian context. The present Cyrillic writing system was adopted at a series of conferences in Frunze (now Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan), 1953-1955 (Rimsky-Korsakoff 1967:357), which makes it novel in comparison to the long history of Chinese characters.

The term 'corpus' is used in various ways in linguistics. The mainstream approaches apply the term to a structured collection of machine-readable texts with varying amounts of accompanying annotation (see *inter alia* Laippala and Palander-Collin 2020:460). Meyer (2006:1-3) argues, however, that in terms of their medium, corpora can be divided into electronic and pre-electronic since some earlier creations, such as Biblical Concordances, were essentially corpora on paper. In practice, modern corpora are all in a digital format; consequently, this is the domain the present work focuses on. From the definitions above, it follows that a recording of a Dungan conversation by itself, without any further annotations, for example, remains primary data rather than a corpus.

Mosel (to appear) divides corpora into corpora of major

languages and language documentation (LD) corpora.<sup>1</sup> This division is justified since the scope and creation process of the two, among other things, often differ. Also, Ostler (2008) demonstrates that the motives for creating and making available corpora of major languages and LD corpora are often distinct. Furthermore, while major language corpora have received substantial attention at the theoretical level, reflected in the publication of handbooks and articles, this is not yet the case for LD corpora, where theoretical investigation remains far more limited. Thus, justified reasons exist to distinguish LD corpora as a distinct format from corpora of major languages.<sup>2</sup> In the context of the authors' work on Dungan, 'corpus' refers to

---

<sup>1</sup> Since the study of lesser-researched languages remains less discussed regarding corpus design, some terminological variation exists. Chelliah (2021) uses the shorter form 'documentation corpora' while Vinogradov (2016) prefers 'under-resourced language corpora'. In this paper, while we follow Mosel's term 'language documentation (LD) corpora', we point out that the term 'corpora for under-researched languages' would be broader and more inclusive. First, if a difference is drawn between language documentation and description (Himmelmann 1998), not all corpora of under-researched languages are best characterized as documentation corpora. Second, 'under-researched' emphasizes no fundamental linguistic difference between 'major' languages with extensive research and 'minoritized' languages. Rather, the differences between the two are external: For instance, due to political and economic factors, many European languages have become 'major' global languages, unlike regionally spoken 'minoritized' languages whose speakers generally have no history of colonial expansion. As a result, such 'global languages' often have considerably longer and broader academic research histories, yet this has nothing to do with their intrinsic linguistic properties.

<sup>2</sup> Mosel's classification represents two extremes among a continuum, and corpora somewhere between the two are possible. Also, the term 'major languages' is problematic, given its vagueness. For instance, Kazakh ranks among the one hundred most spoken languages among the 7,000 currently used languages worldwide. While corpora of Written Kazakh have been created, no corpus of Spoken Kazakh existed before the initiation of the Multimedia Corpus of Modern Spoken Kazakh Language Project at Nazarbayev University (Filchenko et al. 2023).



Mosel's category of LD corpora.

Field linguistics and language description are still, to some extent, unaware of their dependence on corpora. In other words, while many field linguists transform the results of their fieldwork into searchable and machine-readable annotated texts on programs, such as ELAN and FLE<sub>x</sub> (FieldWorks Language Explorer), the similarity between these outputs and more prototypical corpora often goes unnoticed. In short, the rapid development of information technology in the past decades has resulted in a *modus operandi* where increasingly many researchers and research teams in descriptive linguistics and language documentation digitally process their source materials from the field into annotated outputs that resemble corpora in most of their essential aspects.

Sometimes, 'corpus' refers only to the aggregated materials deposited in an archive, such as the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) and DOBES (Dokumentation bedrohter Sprachen). Since the only major difference between before and after the moment of deposition in such cases is public (or at least broader access) to the corpus, the collected language materials become a corpus by being deposited and made publicly available.

In this paper, we nevertheless apply a broader view of corpora. When a researcher collects a set of recordings and annotates them, using this collection to draw inductive generalizations, even such non-published or pre-published annotated and machine-readable materials should be seen as corpora. Corpora of less-researched languages often remain unpublished. However, the current trend in research practices also points towards increasing online presence for such corpora, marking a positive trend toward more open research practices.

Even though some types of corpora have become the backbone of modern descriptive linguistics and language documentation, not all linguistic fieldwork and grammatical descriptions are based on corpora. For instance, an approach where the investigator explores the morphosyntax of the target

language primarily through translating sentences from a *lingua franca* and then incorporating the examples into a descriptive text remains common. Even more clearly, a native speaker of an under-researched language may build his or her description based on native intuition and constructed examples rather than collecting a database of source materials.

Finally, the study uses the notion of 'negotiation' to explain the complexities that arise in corpus design. Negotiation has been extensively studied in organizational behavior and management science (Brett and Thompson 2016). At the core, it involves resolving conflicting interests between different stakeholders. This study uses the term more broadly to refer to the process or processes for balancing a conflict that emerges between an ideal state and practical constraints. The broader meaning is necessary because the nature of conflict here is more abstract than in human organizations and their management, where the focus lies on human actors. In brief, for this paper, we define negotiation as the processes that, at least ideally, lead to harmonization and compromise between an ideal and practical constraints.

## STRUCTURE AND LINGUISTIC CONVENTIONS

After the introduction, corpus design from the viewpoint of negotiation is discussed with a focus on four subtopics where ideals and realities collide. This is followed by a summary of the study's key arguments.

In the presented linguistic examples, we use Leipzig Glossing Rules <sup>1</sup> and the included abbreviations when standardized abbreviations exist. Additional abbreviations have been coined when needed. Dungan examples are offered with five-line glosses. The first line offers etymological spellings with words of Sinitic origin written with Chinese characters. In

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>, accessed 1 June 2025.

contrast, those of Russian and Turkic origin are represented in Cyrillic. This is followed by the Cyrillic orthography of Dungan together with the standard three-line glossing format. While this approach to glossing may appear unnecessarily complex, it reflects the complex realities of language contact and multilingualism that the Dungans have faced and continue to face daily.

The tones of Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan differ from those of Standard Mandarin. In this paper, they are marked as follows: ā '去声 realized as a high tone' (tone letters 1, 1), á '平声 realized as a rising tone' (tone letter 1), à '上声 realized as a falling tone' (tone letter 1), V 'neutral tone' (values adopted from Wang et al. 2015:40). The absence of a tone mark indicates our interpretation that the syllable is pronounced in a neutral tone, which typically applies to short grammatical morphemes that often undergo elision in their nucleus vowel. Importantly, tonal marking should not be interpreted in terms of Hanyu Pinyin, which is used for Standard Mandarin. For example, the noun 山 *shān* 'mountain' is pronounced in a high flat tone (tone letter 1) in Standard Mandarin, while in Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan, the corresponding word *cah* /sán/ 'mountain' is pronounced in a low-rising tone (tone letter 1). As the example illustrates, "á" in Dungan is thus used as a shorthand for the Dungan rising tone, the properties of which are somewhat distinct from the rising tone of Standard Mandarin.

## CORPUS DESIGN AS NEGOTIATION

Drawing on a case study of Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan, the present section investigates corpus design as negotiation. The topic and the four ways of conflict between ideals and reality are mapped and discussed, the naturalness of the materials included in the corpus is addressed, the 'demarcation problem' in corpus design is dealt with, data collection location is presented, and the conclusion argues for a special interconnected relationship

between second language acquisition, corpus design, and linguistic description.

## THE AXIS OF NEGOTIATION

The present paper interprets corpus design as a negotiation process where idealized practices conflict with what is feasible or possible to accomplish. Earlier research on corpus linguistics has acknowledged corpora as an outcome of negotiation processes. For instance, Hunston (2006:156-157) states that corpora are compromises under practical constraints, the most important of which are "software limitations, copyright and ethical issues, and text availability." These inarguably constitute major challenges in corpus design. In investigating Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan, however, the present study argues that constraints rooted deeper in corpus design also exist. In brief, we focus on the axis of negotiation at the corpus design stage, which needs addressing early in an LD corpus project.

As summarized in Table 1, the present study demonstrates LD corpus design and must address four key issues. Challenges associated with each of these issues can be overcome with negotiation, as discussed further below. The first issue concerns the naturalness of the source materials and their representativeness. Here, the conflict lies between the ideal of creating a representative corpus with natural language versus difficulties in obtaining and analyzing such materials. The second conflict is about the demarcation of linguistic forms. In short, corpora often assume distinct languages where each element can be clearly labeled under one language. However, multilingual realities are often more complex, leading to what will be discussed later as "Schrödinger's words and morphemes."

Furthermore, the location of data collection presents another potential field of conflict where the ideal of *in situ* data collection stands in contrast with the fact that people are increasingly mobile in our global world. Finally, we highlight mastery of the target language as the fourth axis of negotiation,

where the ideal of corpus creators speaking the target language fluently conflicts with the frequent reality of incomplete command. In this context, we propose a triangular relationship between second language acquisition, corpus design, and linguistic description, emphasizing the interconnectedness of these three elements.

Table 1. Components of negotiation in corpus building for fieldwork purposes

Component	Ideal	Challenge	Negotiation outcome
Naturalness and representation	Collection of natural language representing all major speech genres	Difficulty in obtaining and analyzing natural materials	Collecting materials feasible for analysis aiming for highest naturalness possible
Demarcation of languages	A single distinguishable linguistic form as the target	Difficulty in demarcating languages in a multi-lingual setting	Shifting the focus from clearly demarcated languages into multilingual practices
Location of data collection	Data collected <i>in situ</i> at the natural location of the speech community	Globalization and increasing mobility of people	Data collected where feasible, even including hybrid environments
Mastery of the language	People involved in design and annotating speak the	Non-natives at work; acquisition of the language	Incorporation of SLA into corpus design and language analysis

---

language	often	for their
natively	neglected	enhancement

---

REPRESENTATION AND NATURALNESS OF DATA

Especially since Biber's (1993) seminal article, representation has been broadly discussed in corpus design. Representativeness is often listed as one of the aims of corpora of major languages. In turn, certain authors have been skeptical about the possibility of creating a corpus of an under-researched language that is both representative and balanced. To illustrate, Vinogradov (2016) argues that this is impossible, resulting in the inability to use such corpora for any quantitative research.

Related to the above is the naturalness of the data contained in the corpus. Corpus design generally prefers natural data, such as spontaneous and unprompted conversations. The downside lies in that, unlike in the cases of more researched languages, natural data for under-researched languages is often challenging to obtain and/or annotate. This, in turn, leads to the question of whether the corpora of lesser-studied languages should be constructed with the same principles of representativeness and naturalness as the goals.

Full representativeness remains a distant dream for most of the work with LD corpora. However, this does not nullify the importance of aiming for each case's highest level of representativeness possible. Also, although there is a growing trend in linguistic fieldwork to focus on naturally-occurring speech instead of e.g., folktales only, full naturalness remains a goal that is hard to reach. Consequently, our underlying approach for investigating Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan has been the negotiation between representative and natural data versus data that is feasible to collect and analyze. This has resulted in incorporating non-conversational prompted materials into the corpus of collected speech. As an additional benefit, this

demonstrates how the speakers of the target language perceive their language when spoken more consciously.

- (1) 把我養下了回族家里。

Ба вә ёнхали хуэйзү жяни.

*pá = və                      jòŋxā=li                      xwítsú                      tɕá=ne.*

ACC=1SG                      give.birth=PFV Dungan                      home=LOC

'I was born in a Dungan family. (lit. I was given birth...)'

我们房子里十三个娃娃：十个儿子，三个丫头。

Ому фонзыни шы сангә вава: шыгә эрзы, сангә яту.

*ò=m                      fòŋzə=ne                      ʂá-sán=kə                      vávà.*

1=PL                      home=LOC                      ten-three=CLF child

*ʂá=kə                      ázə,                      sán=kə                      játʰu.*

ten=CLF                      boy                      three=CLF                      girl

'In our home (family), there are thirteen children: ten boys and three girls.' (personal fieldwork)

- (2) 我给你 скину 把那个。你 можешь 吗 отпроситься? 我们 где-то 表四个上 начало.

Вә ги ни скину ба нэгә. Ни можешь ма отпроситься?

Вәму где-то бө сыгә хон начало.

*və                      k=nì                      skʲinu                      pá =nē=kə.                      nì*

1SG                      DAT=2SG                      send.PFV.1SG                      ACC=DEM=CLF 2SG

*moʒeʂ=ma                      atprasʲitʲsʲa?                      ò=m*

*g(d)ʲeta*

can.PFV.2SG=Q                      get.leave.PFV.INF                      1=PL                      about

*pjò                      s̄ə=k=xōŋ                      nateʰala.*

o'clock                      four=CLF=DAT begin.PST.N.SG

'I will send you that (the information) now. Can you get leave from work? The beginning (of the show) is at about four o'clock.' (personal fieldwork)

Examples (1) and (2) above demonstrate that Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan speakers' conceptualization of their language differs from actual everyday linguistic performance. While the idealized form of the language avoids excessive non-Sinitic vocabulary (1), natural everyday speech (2) abounds in elements of Russian origin. Also, the contrast shows that several phenomena encountered in the spoken language have not become phonologized, e.g., the contrast between the shortened vs. the long forms of several words, as in *=kə* vs. *=k* 'general classifier now mostly functioning as an individuation marker'.

Building the corpus of lesser-studied languages faces factors that affect the naturalness of the data, such as native speakers' attitudes and proficiency. Firstly, the prescriptive "puristic" language attitude in Kazakhstan influences Dungan speakers' use of language. As noted by our primary language consultant, who perceives herself as *шалал* "shala," a Kazakh word literally meaning "half," and this attitude forced her to use "purer" Dungan instead of code-switching or drawing from lexical resources of Russian origin. Secondly, conscious of being recorded, speakers try to produce the most idealized sentences in "pure Dungan," which often conflicts with researchers' expectations of recording natural language. In other words, the observer's paradox<sup>1</sup> leads language consultants to speak "performed" and "self-conscious" speech (Schilling 1998).

Even though fieldworkers emphasize the use of natural language and attempt to record natural speech by different elicitation tasks, because of fieldworkers' presence, language consultants often try to speak slower, louder, or use Dungan phrases that they might not use on other occasions. Contributing to the image of the Dungan language in the scholarly discourse, speakers tend to control their speech thoroughly. To lessen the

---

<sup>1</sup> Following the classical definition of Labov (1972:209): "...the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation."



effect, we recorded phone conversations with the consent of both participants obtained for their use as research materials. This turned out to be more useful since the presence of another speaker made participants focus more on the content of the conversation rather than the use of language perceived as "pure." Another way has been to ask our language consultant to record at home. Because of the presence of the recorder, it was less effective.

Different levels of language proficiency usually limit the genres of speech. The vocabulary of endangered language speakers may undergo attrition, and some speakers can only speak in specific genres, which is usually limited to everyday conversation or, even more drastically, tokenistic use of the language. At the same time, they might be unable to elaborate on the other topics without code-switching and code-mixing. Combined with the previously mentioned language ideology, these factors significantly reduce the chances of obtaining natural language data from many younger speakers of Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan.

In sum, unlike when creating corpora for the more researched languages in the world, for which abundant source materials of natural speech often exist, in LD corpus design, elements of non-spontaneous speech can also be incorporated into the corpus, as long as they are properly tagged for the user's benefit. The decision to include or exclude such materials can, therefore, be made by the end user of the corpus, depending on their specific research needs.

#### DEMARICATION PROBLEMS AND CORPUS DESIGN

The times have now made multilingual corpora more acceptable. This positive development recognizes that the Western tendency for monolingualism is merely an illusion in our world, where multilingualism is the norm, not an exception. At the same time, multilingualism in the corpora creates a new issue, termed here the "demarcation problem." The crux of this issue concerns how

to encode linguistic differences in a multilingual corpus. For instance, multiple languages can be coded into the corpora by indicating the language for each distinct element. To illustrate, in the context of multilingual Caucasasia, where earlier corpus design practices have faced challenges, Gippert (2012:22) argues for fine-grained language codes that address the issue of marking multiple languages in a single corpus.

The aim to incorporate multilingual practices into corpora constitutes a great improvement in corpus architecture, defined by Zeldes (2020:49) as decisions concerning the conceptual division and interrelations of the kinds of objects a corpus contains and how these are represented. The current practices, nevertheless, mostly fail to address the issue of 'fuzzy boundaries of languages.' In other words, languages are conceptualized as mutually exclusive and clearly distinct units that can always be differentiated.

In practice, languages blend in due to language contact, and in some cases, it may result in difficulty delineating them clearly. As Romaine (1994:12) states, the idea of discrete and countable languages is possibly a European cultural artifact. Going a step further, Maoni and Pennycook (2007:1) state, "...languages were, in the most literal sense, invented, particularly as part of the Christian/colonial and nationalistic projects in different parts of the globe."

There is much truth to these claims connecting the idea of separate, quantifiable, and distinct languages with Western thinking. At the same time, language as a notion is fundamental for linguistics. While recognizing the demarcation problem, we certainly do not advocate the abolition of the term 'language', but rather highlight how the quantifying approach poses challenges in corpus design.

Investigating Dungan and collecting the materials for the corpus collided with the demarcation problem. Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan is now fully intertwined with Russian, and most speakers of the language are either bilingual or multilingual since some Kazakhstani Dungans are also fluent in Kazakh or

another regional language.<sup>1</sup> In some instances, drawing lines between Dungan and non-Dungan materials results in identification challenges, both of practical and methodological nature. This can be exemplified by the Dungan word *машнэ* /maʃne/ 'car' (3). No other word for 'car' exists in the language. The word is widely known and used by the speakers of the language. At the same time, Dungan speakers do not accept it as Dungan but rather consider it Russian, matching with its known etymological source in the language, namely *машина* /maʃina/ 'car'.

(3) 我连单另 *машне* 去呢。

Вә лян данлин *машне* чини.

və lja=tálɨj maʃne tɕʰɪ=ni.

1SG COM=other car go=PROSP

'I will go by another car.' (personal fieldwork)

Unlike *машнэ* /maʃne/, however, many, if not most, modern loanwords-like components in Dungan discourse do not undergo phonological adaptation, so this fails to provide any clues for demarcation either. The key question consequently asks whether such elements in the source materials should be coded as Dungan or Russian (or, in the case of another source language, under that language). Such "Schrödinger's words" that manifest the features of both codes simultaneously are aplenty and typically belong to the semantic fields of objects and notions of the modern era, e.g., *самолет* /samaɭot/ 'airplane', *садик* /sadiɕ/ 'kindergarten', and *цирк* /tsirk/ 'circus'.

Theoretically, the issues can be solved from three perspectives. To begin with, the coding in a corpus may focus on etymology, namely the diachronic aspects of language, and thus code elements of Sinitic, Russian, and Perso-Arabic sources with different codes. Alternatively, an approach focusing on native

---

<sup>1</sup> This also affects the language's morphosyntax. See Honkasalo (2024) for a detailed analysis of 'Russification' in Dungan.

speakers' intuition would consider those words Dungan that native speakers acknowledge as such. Finally, the synchronic contact-linguistic approach would pursue the topic by considering how deeply the words are adapted to Dungan. Like in the case of *машнә* /maʃne/, the three approaches may give conflicting results.

Furthermore, Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan manifests at least a few 'hybrid words,' the components of which come from different languages. The word for 'neighbor,' *хуәшын* /xuəʃlin/, appears as the most potential example. The first part likely has a Turkic etymology, cf. the Kazakhstani Ghulja Uyghur *хошна* 'neighbor'. On the other hand, the second part seems to derive from the Sinitic word *lín* (as in Standard Mandarin) 邻 'neighbor,' generally used in compounds. While word-internal components can be coded to different sources, the meaningfulness of this remains questionable.

Taking a comparative perspective, similarities abound in other languages spoken in multilingual settings, indicating that the challenges faced in the case of Dungan are by no means unique to this language. The demarcation problem has not been properly addressed in earlier corpus studies likely results from the fact that many widely-known corpora created in the past are based on European languages in societies where awareness of multilingualism has historically been less pronounced.

The situation of the Western Tibetosphere resembles that of Central Asia. Instead of a 'triangle of multilingualism' between Russian, the national language, and minority languages, multilingualism in the Eastern Tibetosphere is characterized by a complex relationship between Chinese (the national language), Tibetan languages, and (other) minority languages (see e.g., Roche 2018).

Geshiza, a Gyalrongic language of Sichuan in China, has been in intensive contact with Chinese over recent decades. This has resulted in a significant influx of Chinese loanwords into the language (see Honkasalo 2019), contrasting heavily with earlier Tibetan lexical influence. Like the case of Dungan, on many

occasions, it remains challenging to establish whether a lexical element constitutes code-switching or borrowing. To illustrate, in (4) /tɕʰetsə/ 'car' has been borrowed from the Chinese *chēzi* 车子 'car'. The Geshiza, who are bilingual in Chinese, consider this word Chinese. At the same time, it has established itself, gaining wide use since no native word exists to denote 'car'. Again, phonology offers no extra help since similar recent lexical elements of Sinitic origin do not undergo phonological adaptation.

- (4) Geshiza (Honkasalo 2019:710, modified and translation corrected)

<i>sʰævi</i>	<i>tɕʰu</i>	<i>mdzə</i>	<i>vɕe-ræ,</i>	<i>tɕʰetsə.</i>
next.year	CONJ	exchange.INF	AUX.need-SENS	car

'It needs to be changed the next year, the car.'

A corpus built on the principle of separate and discreet languages cannot handle the ambiguity of a word being simultaneously Sinitic and Russian any more than we can imagine Schrödinger's cat being simultaneously dead and alive. Shifting the focus offers a partial exit from the conundrum above. Most language documentation corpora are constructed language-centrally. As demonstrated above, this approach results in the need to essentialize and demarcate languages. On the other hand, we propose the notion of corpora of communicative practices where the focal points shift from languages to the communicative practices of speech communities. This proposal builds on the notion of translanguaging. Instead of possessing autonomous language systems, translanguaging posits that multilingual speakers use features from their unitary linguistic repertoire to communicate (Vogel and García 2017). In practice, many speakers of minoritized languages are now multilingual. When communicating, they draw from all their available linguistic resources.

Central Asia is a multilingual linguistic space where many speak several languages daily. Applying the notion of the corpus of communicative practices is particularly beneficial for capturing the linguistic behavior in such a space. In practical terms, this means documenting the daily practices of speakers of a language, such as Dungan, without regard to language and building the corpus around performance. Compared to the existing practices that emphasize distinct languages,<sup>1</sup> this approach would enable us to see a broader range of linguistic practices in the speaker community.

#### LOCATION OF DATA COLLECTION

Another aspect of LD corpus design addresses location, namely, where the source materials are collected. In terms of fieldwork, data collection branches into *in situ* and *ex situ*. In the former, the researcher collects data from a language community from their core location. This would prototypically refer to a homeland or location inhabited by the community for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. On the other hand, the latter refers to a non-conventional location, such as an immigrant community or a refugee camp.

The location of source material collection has been discussed previously. Many scholars, such as Williams and Comfort (2007:267), recognize it as acceptable when other, better options are challenging. At the same time, skeptical views surface frequently, voiced among others by Aikhenvald (2007:5):

Working with immigrant communities – if a language is well spoken in a home country – is also hardly advisable: many grammatical features are extremely prone to contact induced change and are likely to shift under the impact of

---

<sup>1</sup> This claim is easily proven by inspecting the names of major available corpora that almost invariably include a single language name.

introducing new – and losing old – cultural practices. .... But it is bound to give a skewed picture of the language's structure.

The bifurcation in location expresses an outdated understanding, disregarding human mobility that has sped up global migration flows, further likely accelerated by the global climate crisis that will potentially render some parts of our planet inhabitable. It also does not consider hybrid sources that may be created when speakers of a minoritized language interact in cyberspace. Furthermore, at its deeper level, the criticism of *ex situ* fieldwork may presuppose linguistic purism that perceives 'contaminated' contact varieties as inferior vis-à-vis to their 'purer' counterparts.

The Dungans themselves are an exile community originating from Western and Northwestern China under the rule of the Qing Empire (1644-1912). The Qing Dynasty's defeat in the first Opium War (1839-1842) resulted in various revolts across the empire, weakening its power (Khalid 2021:79). In other words, the perceived weakness and humiliating defeat made the ruling dynasty appear as less fit to rule, questioning its "mandate of heaven" (天命), namely the legitimate right to rule. As one of the rebel groups reacting to the changing geopolitical setting, the Dungans rose against the Qing Empire in a revolt (1862-1877). As a result of its failure, they had to relocate to safer territory outside the Qing Empire. The Russian domains of Central Asia offered the most accessible alternative, resulting in the Dungan habitation of Central Asia attested today. Consequently, the presence of Dungans in Central Asia, at least in part, results from global politics with events taking place in faraway coastal China and offers yet another illustration of a political long-distance effect from an era before globalization.

A sizable part of our Dungan data originates from the Astana Gansu Dungan community. Yet, the original intention of the research project was to build the corpus from Southern Kazakhstan along the Kyrgyzstani border known as the

heartland of Kazakhstani Dungan habitation. When the project's principal investigator was living in Astana, through mere serendipity, we discovered that a sizable community of Dungans now live in the city. This sizable community has never been documented in earlier research and exceeds several hundred families in the capital, often with many children. At the same time, it should also be noted that most Dungan families spend most of their lifetime in Southern Kazakhstan and moved to Astana within the last two decades. While approximately half of our corpus materials originate from the South, we have decided to incorporate materials from Astana into it. The mere practical dimensions dictate that not utilizing this opportunity would have been unreasonable.

Astana is the youngest capital in the world, having witnessed rapid economic growth and population expansion since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991. Before 1997, only a few Dungan families lived in Astana (at the time, Tselinograd), possibly even two. Therefore, it is hardly possible to talk of Astana as the historical homeland of the Dungan people. Nevertheless, a sizable community of Dungans has now settled permanently in Astana. Furthermore, as illustrated above, Central Asian Dungans are historically migratory, with only approximately 150 years of history in the region. Against this backdrop, it is reasonable to ask how long a linguistic community must have resided in a location so that the data collection process is considered *in situ*?<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> While the discussion above focuses on the Dungans in Kazakhstan, similar issues are identifiable across the globe. To illustrate, thousands of Tibetans migrated to India after Tibet's annexation into the People's Republic of China. While becoming refugees was originally intended as a temporary solution, reconciliation between China and refugee Tibetans seems increasingly unlikely. As a result, many Tibetans have come to accept residency in India as a fact, not a temporary state. It is thus relevant to consider whether Dharamshala is a suitable place for investigating Tibetic (and other) languages. Following the arguments offered in this study, Dharamshala can now be seen as a part of the Tibetan-speaking world and a potential



Dunganological research has been greatly affected by linguistic purism. Descriptive grammars and earlier collected materials of the language exist. Examining Lin (2012) and Wang et al. (2015) as two representative monographs on Dungan grammar (in Chinese), it is clear that earlier research tends to treat Dungan as a rather typical Chinese dialect, although with some borrowings from Russian, Turkic, and Perso-Arabic sources. This contrasts with our findings that show Dungan in thorough linguistic contact with Russian and, to a lesser extent, with Turkic languages (see also footnote 5). Rather than trying to find the most isolated Dungan community with minimal historical relocation to discover the 'purest' shape of the language, the project has focused on this contact. As discussed above, a sizable part of the source materials originates from Astana, which had no earlier historical Dungan habitation.

In relation to this, an important factor to consider while building a corpus of a small group is the participants' age. Endangered languages have a low level of intergenerational transmission. Therefore, younger participants obtain a smaller vocabulary and tend to code-switch more often than older generations. Personal fieldwork done on Gansu Dungan speakers in Kazakhstan has shown that age is more important than location since younger participants from Southern Kazakhstan have demonstrated lower language proficiency than the older participants from Astana.

#### CORPUS DESIGN, SLA, AND GRAMMATICAL DESCRIPTION

Grammatical description and linguistic fieldwork are rarely discussed theoretically from the viewpoint of second language acquisition, save some notable exceptions, such as the role of monolingual fieldwork (see e.g., Everett 2001). In this section,

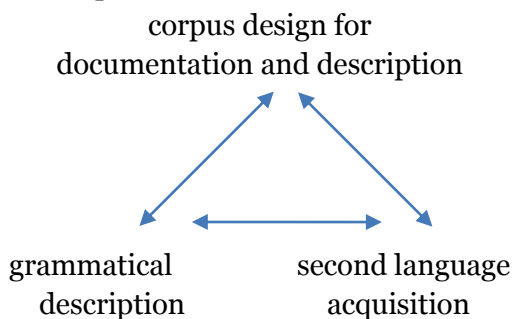
---

location for collecting corpus materials and conducting fieldwork with all the caveats that must be considered in *ex situ* fieldwork.

we argue that a strong connection exists between the two.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, both are interconnected with corpus design, forming a triangular model of corpus-based language description in Figure 1 below.

While corpora of more researched languages, such as English, may be used for second language acquisition and for designing learning materials, the process of corpus design itself is usually not connected with the designers' English learning process. In other words, a team member who creates a corpus of English or French is expected to know the language, often natively, and the process of corpus building is fully separate from SLA. In what follows, we nevertheless argue that LD corpora differ fundamentally in this regard. Specifically, SLA plays a key role in the negotiation process involved in forming LD corpora and should consequently be taken more into account.

Figure 1. The triangular relationship of corpus design, SLA, and grammatical description



Linguistic communities generally appreciate the researcher's efforts to learn the target language and attempts to use it in daily communication besides the research activities. Moreover, as Mosel (to appear) argues, the quality of the collected corpus data depends on the interaction with the local

---

<sup>1</sup> This obviously does not hold in cases where the researcher is a native speaker of the investigated language, such as Tunzhi's (2019) grammar of Northwestern Stau (Sino-Tibetan, Gyalrongic).

partners. Consequently, increased focus on second language acquisition, far from being time wasted, is likely to bring major benefits to any long-lasting description or documentation project of an under-researched language.

Russian departments worldwide rarely start their introductory courses by systematically reading *War and Peace*. Rather, due to a significant body of knowledge regarding SLA, the classes and courses typically proceed progressively from materials deemed easy to more demanding ones. The expectations differ when collecting source materials through fieldwork and analyzing their linguistic content. The current academic environment exerts considerable pressure on performance: Results are needed, and they are needed fast. By focusing on collecting materials that are ideal for corpus design, researchers may neglect the aspect of their own language acquisition. This results in working at a level of the target language surpassing one's capacities, which is directly connected to negotiating the naturalness of data discussed in the section on representation and naturalness of data.

Schneider (2011) argues that language learning is linguistic analysis. From the close relationship of the two, it follows that successful learning of the target language often plays a pivotal role in the success of a project of morphosyntactic description or language documentation. For one, it enables the researcher to process and annotate more natural source materials, thus increasing the amount of available materials in the corpus and potentially increasing its representativeness, connecting the first and last points of negotiation discussed in this article with each other.

The connections go even further. Paying attention to SLA offers potential benefits to handling problematic situations in corpus design, such as when boundaries between languages are difficult to determine, as discussed in the context of the demarcation problem, the second axis of negotiation. While higher linguistic awareness of the language(s) included in a

corpus will not solve all demarcation problems, it may contribute to settling some cases.

In sum, corpus design, grammatical description, and second language acquisition are all interconnected with strong synergy between the three. It is worth noting that benefits can flow in any direction in the triangular relationship. For instance, LD corpora can create learning and literacy materials for lesser-studied languages (see also Schneider 2011 on literacy development).

## CONCLUSION

Drawing on the authors' work on Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan, the present paper argues that corpus design for less-researched languages is often a process of negotiation, which has not been sufficiently discussed in previous literature where fieldwork guides, for instance, often offer idealistic suggestions for corpus design. We identified four key axes of negotiation: naturalness of data, demarcation of languages, location of data collection, and linguistic knowledge of the target language by the investigators. The study demonstrated that corpora of less-researched languages may need to compromise more in some of the above, such as the naturalness of the data. At the same time, the issue of connecting corpus design with the acquisition of the target language is unique to such corpora when compared with the creation process of corpora for 'major' languages. Finally, shifting focus from the notion of distinct and independent languages into linguistic practices offers a potentially valuable new approach to studying multilingual spaces, such as Central Asia, since the demarcation of languages is not always straightforward.

## ABBREVIATIONS

1 'first person', 2 'second person', 3 'third person', ACC 'accusative', AUX 'auxiliary', CLF 'classifier', COM 'comitative', CONJ 'conjunction', COP 'copula', DAT 'dative', DEM 'demonstrative', INF 'infinitive', LOC 'locative', N 'neuter gender', NMLZ 'nominalizer', PFV 'perfective', PL 'plural', POT 'potential', PROSP 'prospective', PST 'past', Q 'question', S 'single participant of an intransitive clause', SENS 'sensory evidential', SG 'singular'.

## REFERENCES

- Aikhenvald, Alexandra. 2007. Linguistic Fieldwork: Setting the Scene *in STUF - Language Typology and Universals* 60(1):3-11.
- Biber, Douglas. 1993. Representativeness in Corpus Design. *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 8(4):243-257.
- Brett, Jeanne and Leigh Thompson. 2016. Negotiation. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 136:68-79.
- Chelliah, Shobhana L. 2021. *Why Language Documentation Matters*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Eberhard, David, Gary Simons, and Charles Fennig (eds.). 2022. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Twenty-fifth ed. Dallas, Texas: SIL International.
- Everett, Daniel. 2001. Monolingual Fieldwork *in* Paul Newman and Martha Ratliff (eds.), *Linguistic Fieldwork*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 166-188.
- Filchenko, Andrey, Giorgia Troiani, John W Du Bois, Gulnar Sarseke, Akyl Akanov, Moldir Bizhanova, Nikolay Mikhailov, Tansulu Temirbekova, Bibarys Seitak, and Zhansaya Turaliyeva. 2023. *Multimedia Corpus of Spoken Kazakh Language*.  
<https://research.nu.edu.kz/en/projects/multimedia-corpus-of-modern-spoken-kazakh-language>

accessed 25 March 2025

- García, Ofelia and Li Wei. 2014. *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gippert, Jost. 2012. Language-specific Encoding in Endangered Language Corpora *in* Frank Seifart, Geoffrey Haig, Nikolaus P. Himmelmann, Dagmar Jung, Anna Margetts, and Paul Trilsbeek (eds), *Potentials of Language Documentation: Methods, Analyses, and Utilization*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 25–31.
- Himmelmann, Nikolaus P. 1998. Documentary and Descriptive Linguistics. *Linguistics* 36(1):161-195.
- Honkasalo, Sami. 2019. *A Grammar of Eastern Geshiza: A Culturally Anchored Description*. University of Helsinki PhD dissertation.
- Honkasalo, Sami. 2024. Kazakhstani Gansu Dungan: An Analysis of Language Contact with Russian. *Languages Special Issue "Typology of Chinese Languages: One Name, Many Languages"* 9(2):59.
- Hunston, Susan. 2006. Collection Strategies and Design Decisions *in* Anke Lüdeling and Merja Kytö (eds.), *Corpus Linguistics: An International Handbook*, Vol 1. Berlin and New York: Walter deGruyter, 154–168.
- Khalid, Adeeb. 2021. *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Labov, William. 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Laippala, Veronika and Minna Palander-Collin. 2020. Korpusaineistot [Linguistic Corpora] *in* Milla Luodonpää-Manni, Markus Hamunen, Reetta Konstenius, Matti Miestamo, Urpo Nikanne, and Kaius Sinnemäki (eds.), *Kielentutkimuksen menetelmiä I-IV [Research Methods in Linguistics I-IV]*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 460–486.

- Lin Tao 林涛. 2012. 东干语调查研究 *Dōnggànyǔ diàochá yánjiū* [A Study of the Dungan Language in Central Asia]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- Makoni, Sinfree and Alastair Pennycook. 2007. Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages in Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook (eds.), *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*. Clevedon, Buffalo, and Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 1-41.
- Meyer, Charles F. 2006. Pre-electronic Corpora in Anke Lüdeling and Merja Kytö(eds.), *Corpus Linguistics: An International Handbook*, Vol 1. Berlin and New York: Walter deGruyter, 1-14.
- Mosel, Ulrike. To appear. Corpus Building for Under-researched Languages: A Practical Guide in Firmin Ahoua, Dafydd Gibbon, and Stavros Skopeteas, *Linguistic Fieldwork and Language Documentation: A Course Book on Foundational Skills*.
- Rimsky-Korsakoff, Svetlana. 1967. Soviet Dungan: The Chinese Language of Central Asia: Alphabet, Phonology, Morphology. *Monumenta Serica* 26:352–421.
- Roche, Gerald. 2018. Draft Report on Tibet's Linguistic Minorities.  
[https://www.academia.edu/35956920/Draft\\_Report\\_on\\_Tibets\\_Linguistic\\_Minorities](https://www.academia.edu/35956920/Draft_Report_on_Tibets_Linguistic_Minorities), accessed 17 March 2025
- Romaine, Suzann. 1994. *Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schilling-Estes, N. 1998. Investigating "Self-conscious" Speech: The Performance Register in Ocracoke English. *Language in Society* 27(1):53-83.
- Schneider, Cynthia. 2011. Why Field Linguists Should Pay More Attention to Research in Applied Linguistics. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 31(2):187–209.
- Tunzhi. 2019. *Outline of Bra' go Variety of rTa'u (Horpa)*. Melbourne: La Trobe University Ph.D. dissertation.

- Vinogradov, Igor. 2016. Linguistic Corpora of Understudied Languages: Do They Make Sense? *Káñina* 40(1):116-130.
- Wang Sen 王森, Wang Yi 王毅, and Wang Xiaoyu 王晓煜. 2015. 中亚东干话调查研究 *Zhōngyà Dōnggànhuà diàochá yánjiū* [A Tungan Language Survey in Central Asia]. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Weber, Jean-Jacques and Kristine Horner. 2012. *Introducing Multilingualism: A Social Approach*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Williams, Robert S and Jade Comfort. 2007. Language Documentation and Description Among Refugee Populations In Peter Austin, Oliver Bond, and David Nathan (eds.), *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory*. London: SOAS, 261–268.
- Zeldes, Amir. 2020. Corpus Architecture in Magali Paquot and Stefan Th. Gries (eds.) *A Practical Handbook of Corpus Linguistics*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 49-73.



## AMDO TIBETAN FEMALE WORKERS IN GSHONG YUL COMMUNITY: LIVES AND MIGRANT LABOR

Bsod noms sgrol ma བསོད་ནམས་སྒྲོལ་མ།  
(Suonan Zhuoma 索南卓玛)<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores five illiterate Tibetan women's backgrounds and experiences while doing factory work, caterpillar fungus collection, and construction labor outside their homes and accounts of their lives in Gshong yul (Xiangyu) Village, Bis mdo (Wendou) Tibetan Township, Ya rdzi (Xunhua) Salar (Sala)<sup>2</sup> Autonomous County, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. The five reports offer detailed and descriptive accounts encompassing marriage, discrimination, prejudice, and workplace living conditions. Their narratives reveal pronounced emotional ambivalence, while their experiences as migrant workers are marked by fear, hardship, and despair. They reflect on their struggle for autonomy through economic participation, a tension reflecting the complex adaptation strategies of illiterate Tibetan women in the process of modernization.

### KEYWORDS

Gshong yul Village, Amdo, Qinghai, Tibetan women, illiteracy, labor, farming, migrant labor

---

<sup>1</sup> Bsod noms sgrol ma བསོད་ནམས་སྒྲོལ་མ། (Suonan Zhuoma 索南卓玛). 2025. Amdo Tibetan Female Workers in Gshong yul Community: Lives and Migrant Labor. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:135-210.

<sup>2</sup> In 2025, Xunhua County was the only autonomous Salar county in China, with a total population of 161,600, of which 6,3859 were Salar. Other ethnic groups in the county include Tibetans, Hui, and Han Chinese. In 2006, the State put the Salar ethnic group in the Special Plan for Supporting the Development of Ethnic Groups of Smaller Population Size. <http://www.xunhua.gov.cn/html/1998/135171.html>, 28 February 2025.

## INTRODUCTION

Life stories of five Tibetan female workers from Gshong yul<sup>1</sup> (Xiangyu) Village, Bis mdo (Wendou) Tibetan Township, Ya rdzi (Xunhua) Salar (Sala) Autonomous County, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China are presented. Gshong yul Village is located in the southwest of Bis mdo Township, twenty kilometers from Ya rdzi County Town. The village lies between 35°74' N and 102°37' E between the Rgya ri ma sgang and Stag lha khri mountains. It is also known as Srung yul<sup>2</sup> because the two mountains resemble tiger-headed creatures protecting the village. In 2023, Gshong yul Village had five tribes<sup>3</sup> with seventy-five households and about 400 people.<sup>4</sup>

### Local Village Background

The government divided Gshong yul Administrative Village into three communes (*gongshe*). The First and Second communes were in Gshong yul Village, and the third was in Ru ma byung (Rimaxiong) Village, five kilometers southwest of Gshong yul Village. The Sha ba and Yu mo tribes, with twelve and twenty-three households, respectively, in Ru ma byung Village had 180 people in thirty-five households.

Gshong yul Village had 1,391 *mu*<sup>5</sup> of cultivated land. Nine hundred *mu* were irrigated, and the rest were rainfed. A complex geological structure characterized this alpine canyon landform.<sup>6</sup> The village's traditional livelihood was based on agricultural

---

<sup>1</sup> *Gshong* 'deep valley', *yul* 'place'.

<sup>2</sup> *Srung* 'protect', *yul* 'place'.

<sup>3</sup> Household count for the tribes: eighteen (Gshong yul), fifteen (Dred tshang), fourteen ('Bar tshang), fifteen (Sha ba tshang), and thirteen (Ed bzhed).

<sup>4</sup> Information provided by the village Communist Party Secretary.

<sup>5</sup> One *mu* is one fifteenth of a hectare.

<sup>6</sup> Xunhua Salar Autonomous County Local Records Compilation Committee (2017:50-51).

production, supplemented by a few domestic livestock. Before 1980, barley, flax, potatoes, and soybeans were cultivated. Barley was the villagers' staple food. Barley production depended solely on natural rainfall, and yields were poor.<sup>1</sup> Households were largely self-sufficient. Barley cultivation slowly decreased with the introduction of wheat, canola, beans, and vegetables such as green onions, radishes, and pak choi (bok choi).

Traditional farming was characterized by human-animal coordination. Two cow-yak crosses pulled a plow from the third month of the Chinese lunisolar calendar year. When sowing, manure, ash fertilizers, and seed were cast. Two cow-yaks later pulled a rake to level the ground. In the fifth lunar month, villagers weeded by hand and diverted water from Klu mo thang and Brag sne nang valleys for irrigation four or five times. Women and children harvested in autumn. Villagers assisted each other by plowing the fields after harvest. Harvested barley and wheat were dried and cleaned in the sun, milled with donkeys or mules pulling a stone roller, sacked, and placed in storerooms. Potatoes and beans were placed in cellars.

Since the late 1990s, villagers have used seed planters, herbicides, pesticides, and commercial fertilizers. Combines harvested wheat and chopped wheat stalks into straw and collected it in metal containers. The chopped stalks were placed in storerooms and later used as livestock feed, bedding, and organic fertilizer.

Tractors transported grain and people from the fields to homes and from homes to the fields and were also used to plow. In addition, government-built concrete irrigation channels reduced irrigation time from seven or eight days to three to four days. These developments increased wheat yields to 300-400 kilograms per *mu*.

The limited carrying capacity of alpine pastures encouraged animal husbandry. Before the 2010s, a household

---

<sup>1</sup> According to the village Party Secretary, barley yield was 150-200 kilograms per *mu* before the 1980s.

typically owned about five head of cow-yak crosses, twenty to thirty sheep, donkeys, swine, and one or two mules. The local cow-yak crosses were used in farming work; to produce meat, milk, butter, and yogurt, and were sold when needed to supplement family income. Piglets were bought and raised for household meat consumption. In 2025, the village had one private goat raiser and a livestock center<sup>1</sup> engaged in cattle and sheep breeding and sales.

In addition, villagers logged a forest on a hillside southwest of Gshong yul Village. Before the government officially closed and managed the forest in 1959, villagers cut timber to build houses and sell. In the 1980s, locals secretly cut trees and sold logs for ten to twenty RMB each, depending on size. Herbs collected and sold to local Salar businessmen included *Gentiana macrophylla* Pall, *Stellera chamaejasme* L, *Polygonum viviparum* L, *Thalictrum* 'Meadow-rue', and ferns.

Most residents sold their livestock because they lacked time to care for them after they began engaging in *zhor las* 'migrant labor'.

Certain government policies encouraged locals to engage in *zhor las* 'migrant labor', including Reform and Opening-up (1978), Western Development (2000), Supporting Ethnic Minorities with Smaller Populations (2005), and Constructing a New Socialist Countryside (2005). In 2019, the government invested one million RMB in developing rural tourism projects to build dams, arch bridges, pavilions, hotels, and restaurants in villages with scenic views in Bis mdo Township. The government recruited many locals to work in construction temporarily, which did not solve long-term employment issues.

---

<sup>1</sup> Yulong Cattle and Sheep Breeding Factory.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### AMDO TIBETAN FEMALE IDENTITY

Social structure, family roles, religious beliefs, and economic activities have historically shaped A mdo Tibetan women's identity. Patriarchy powerfully influenced women in public and domestic spheres. Girls typically learned domestic skills and performed household chores as instructed by family female elders before marriage and generally received little encouragement to pursue education or enter nunneries to pursue religious studies. Immediate family members generally arranged marriages, with women joining their husbands' families after marriage. Married women typically shouldered primary responsibility within the family unit for domestic duties, childcare, and eldercare (Tseyang and Dhondup 2008, Wu 2013, Campbell 2020, Duo 2024).

Women also played pivotal roles in milking and other dairy work, weaving, and planting, making substantial economic contributions. As Buddhists, A mdo Tibetan women actively engaged in religious activities, e.g., daily religious rituals such as rotating prayer wheels, making offerings in their homes and communities, chanting religious texts, and fasting. These women's traditional, multi-faceted identity is complex and constrained by conventional gender roles as they play important roles in family, community, and economic activities (Zhang 1992).

The majority of women's contributions to household and agricultural production labor ensured the family's basic production and livelihood, thereby playing a critical role in keeping men in the workforce (Guo, 2009). However, with the surge in income-earning employment, women became increasingly engaged in the labor market. (Rajan, 2016; Duojie, 2020). They were no longer only responsible for domestic chores but also had a role outside the home. Their identity is not

confined to the family but extends to their participation in the labor market as female workers.

Scholarly projects and perspectives on Tibetan women have examined Chinese communist nationalism, Tibetan nationalism, and Western feminism. However, each viewpoint has its own biases and limits in depicting Tibetan women, given the complexity of Tibetan society and the intricate interactions between various elements impacting women's life (Makley 1997). A more nuanced understanding of Tibetan women's experiences is achieved by placing them in specific regional, class, and religious contexts. This approach aims to avoid essentialism and to see women as active subjects of discourse rather than passive objects.

#### TIBETAN RURAL MIGRANT WORKERS

Tibetan rural migrant workers, as the name implies, are Tibetans who predominantly live in Tibetan rural areas, speak Tibetan, and practice Tibetan Buddhism. They often leave their homeland to pursue non-agricultural economic opportunities, primarily in the service, catering, and construction industries (Fischer 2011, Duojie 2024). These sectors are characterized by high labor intensity, significant workforce density, and low skill levels (Ma 2012, Wang 2014, Sun 2015, Sun 2016, Waner 2018, Dunzhu 2019). Tibetan rural migrant laborers in the A mdo region of Qinghai are of Tibetan ethnicity, predominantly speak the A mdo Tibetan dialect and Qinghai Chinese dialect as a second language. They typically are Tibetan Buddhists and have received limited formal education. Their labor patterns are often shaped by family and gendered dynamics, with male family members and spouses frequently working together. More A mdo males seek employment outside the home compared to women.

Most employment opportunities Tibetan rural migrant workers learn about are from friends and relatives working in A mdo, Khams, Dbus gtsang, and capital cities such as Chengdu (Sichuan) and Zi ling (Xining), Qinghai. These workers are at the

lower end of the employment industry chain in labor-intensive sectors, including construction. Their roles are interwoven within the farming production cycle and are often characterized as short-term, seasonal work (Guan 2015; Wang 2014).

Research on Tibetan female labor groups has concentrated on kinship and social status concerns. Zhang (2009) focused on the development of Lha sa carpet factories from the 1960s to the early 2000s, detailing the marginalization of Tibetan women weavers in the post-socialist period due to the intersection of patriarchy, ethnicity, and capital accumulation. In addition, research by Yang (2007) and Kang (2006) in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture found that the experience of working outside the home had a positive impact on women and their families, enabling them to enhance their knowledge, broaden their horizons, and strengthen their self-awareness and self-esteem. Moreover, their earnings improved their family's financial standing and increased women's decision-making power, moving the traditional husband-wife dynamic toward equality.

However, Dala Duo's (2024) study of female migrant laborers in Chu ka Village, Reb gong (Tongren) City Town, Qinghai yielded a different conclusion. He found that women's increased economic income did not significantly improve women's status or decision-making power in the household. Women continued to be primarily responsible for their dual roles of production and reproduction, suggesting that traditional gender norms and the ethic of caregiving remained resistant to change. This highlights that the impact of work on Tibetan women is complex, and the narrative that economic activity improves women's status is oversimplified. As Rajan (2016) highlighted, a more nuanced understanding of how urbanization and modernization affect women's lives is required, given the complex and sometimes contradictory ways these processes impact individuals.

The present study situates Tibetan women within the broader context of urban-rural migration in Tibetan regions. It

begins an investigation into the limited impact of collective labor patterns on women's familial and social status. Limitations in previous studies include a dearth of detailed case studies on specific experiences of female migrant workers and failure to systematically investigate issues such as gender, identity, and survival of female migrant workers during the migration process. This paper aims to fill gaps in existing research by focusing on the individual narratives of Tibetan female migrant workers from a micro and gender perspective, enhancing the practical comprehension of Tibetan migrant labor gender dynamics.

## CONSULTANTS

Five life stories of Tibetan women from Gshong yul Village are presented. Lha mo (b. 1994), Mtsho mo (b. 1988), Sgrol ma (b. 1983), and Bde skyid (b. 1970) married and moved into Gshong yul Village. Me tog (b. 1969) was born and grew up in Gshong yul Village. None of the women attended public schools.

I used semi-structured interviews with questions to understand why, how, when, and whom they worked with and their ideas about work, family, marriage, and themselves. Our conversations occurred during the 2023 Lunar New Year in Gshong yul Village. I am a local woman and conducted the interviews in A mdo Tibetan. They trusted me and felt free to answer my questions.

Their ages, thoughts and experiences are authentic but I changed their names to protect their privacy.

## ACCOUNT ONE: Lha mo (b. 1994)

I started working when I was fifteen. My mother's sister ran a restaurant near Nepal. I was asked to help because they were short of staff, so I went with my aunt. I don't remember the town's name. I only remember many big mountains, and the pleasant climate was neither particularly hot nor cold. The leaves were green all year round. It was a border area. One side was China, and the other side



was Nepal. Soldiers guarded both sides, and a bridge was in the middle. You had to show your passport to go from one country to another. I could see the houses, the people, and everything on the other side, but I had no passport, so I couldn't cross the border.

The restaurant was simple. Four or five local young women worked there as servers. I couldn't understand them, so I tried to learn the local language. Aunt arranged for me to do the accounts in the restaurant. China and Nepal's currencies differed, so I suffered a lot doing the accounts. Nepalese often ate in our restaurant. The customers laughed at me for being an idiot when I miscalculated the money or communicated poorly. My aunt was temperamental and scolded me severely whenever I made mistakes.

I didn't go home for two years for Lo sar 'Tibetan New Year'. I had no friends and was bored and lonely every day, especially when I was homesick. I called my mother and complained that I didn't want to stay. She agreed, so I returned home with one of my uncles. I don't know how much my aunt paid me because she gave it to my mother.

When I returned home, I assisted my mother with household chores and farming. I married two years later and moved into my husband's home. My mother and brother arranged the marriage. I inwardly refused when I learned I would marry a man I had never met. Still, when I thought that my father had passed away when I was eleven and that my mother and brother had worked hard to rear me, I did not refuse the marriage. I naively thought that if I listened to my mother and worked hard to be a good daughter-in-law in my husband's home, I would live a happy life. However, the reality was harsh.

I was pregnant a year later. My ex-husband's parents were incredibly nice to me, didn't urge me to do a lot of work every day, and didn't force me to go out to work to earn money. Instead, they advised me to stay home and rest. My husband was a truck driver and often away from home. He returned only once or twice a month. I was bored with my in-laws. Sometimes, I felt lonely when I couldn't fit in with their family, so I contacted my cousin and went to work

with her in Hongqi Salar Village in Salar srang (Jiezi) Town for a Salar family building a new house. We ate and lived in their house.

I was five months pregnant. Luckily, my work was not very heavy. I was an assistant laborer.<sup>1</sup> The only demanding thing I did was to follow workers to move wood and bricks. When I sat in a trailer pulled by the tractor, it was tough to move around. I was afraid my belly would strike something. Female workers who knew I was pregnant protected me in the trailer. After working for over a month, the boss saw my belly getting bigger and advised me to go home.

After giving birth to my son, I was pregnant again the following year. My husband was often away from home, and I didn't want to face my parents-in-law alone, so I chose to work with my cousin again, building a new restaurant for a Muslim. I was assigned to carry rocks needed for the foundation. After the truck driver brought a load of rocks, the excavator operator was responsible for unloading them. My cousin, three female Chinese laborers, and I were responsible for putting rocks into holes in the ground to create the restaurant foundation. At first, my boss didn't know I was pregnant. After I had worked for a week, my boss found out and was worried because he didn't want to take responsibility if something happened to me. He advised me to go home. Several other workers also told me to go home and have my baby instead of working there.

However, I desperately didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay and have something to do, have company, and be free, so I pleaded with my boss to allow me to stay. He reluctantly agreed that I would leave after working for a month.

I was careful to avoid rocks slipping when I carried them. I used my hands to ensure the rocks did not press my belly. After I had worked for a month, the boss paid me 3,600 RMB (120 RMB a day). When I started to go home, my cousin bought me a ticket and escorted me to the bus. I was grateful she also bought meat and

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant-workers generally mix concrete, carry building materials (rebar, bricks, etc.), carry buckets, assist men install pipes and cables, and other tasks.

fruit for me.

I did not resent my in-laws because I was pregnant and working. My mother-in-law said, "You are pregnant. You should exercise. If you lie down, rest at home every day, and eat nutritious meals, the baby will absorb too many nutrients and become very big. You won't be able to give birth because the baby will weigh too much. The baby is in the womb and will grow normally as long as you don't crush or hurt him with stones."

When I returned to my ex-husband's home, my mother-in-law encouraged me to walk and exercise so I wouldn't lie in bed. I went to the *ma Ni khang*<sup>1</sup> every day to circumambulate and did chores and farm work that didn't hurt my belly. It was all fine, and there was less pain when I gave birth.

My husband was rarely with me during the two years when I was pregnant. When I learned from my relatives and friends that he had a girlfriend and often smoked, drank, gambled, wandered, and was caught stealing, I felt there was no hope for me in that family. I felt I was just a tool for his children and a caretaker for his parents. Though I had two children and my parents-in-law were very nice to me, I didn't want to stay, so I told my mother and brother I wanted to get a divorce. They agreed.

After the divorce, I returned to my natal home where my mother, brother, sister-in-law, and their two children lived. Neither my brother nor my sister-in-law attended school. They lived by farming, collecting caterpillar fungus, and earning money through construction work. To help my brother share the family's burden, I worked in a factory in Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province, after the harvest with four young village women of the same age. The township government introduced the job to us. The village clerk told us the job didn't require educational qualifications as long as we could speak Chinese and communicate with the boss. We visited a factory that manufactured cell phones. It was my first time in a Chinese city.

---

<sup>1</sup> A place where villagers perform religious activities, circumambulate, prostrate, and chant scriptures.

We arrived in the ninth lunar month, and the weather was very hot. We were a group of five women. Two knew some Chinese, so I just followed them. It was a large factory. The team leader placed the five of us in different workshops. We each had a card and swiped it when we went to work, during security checks, and for meals. Our wages were credited to this card.

Our work schedules were different. I was scheduled from six p.m. to three a.m. and put a QR code on cell phones that passed on a conveyor belt through the hands of about fifty people before reaching me. I used tweezers to remove a QR code prepared in advance and stuck it on the back of the phone. Every workshop had a supervisor. We were not allowed to chat while working and had to wear overalls. When I needed to use the bathroom, I had to inform the supervisor, who then arranged for another person to take my place.

The factory had workshops, canteens, dormitories, and shops. We ate in a crowded cafeteria and had to wait in line for a long time. I ate eggs, pickled mustard tuber, and porridge in the morning. There were various vegetables and noodles at noon and in the evening. The five of us ate cheap meals to save money. I saw some Chinese women eating in the restaurant, but we did not. We lived in the factory women's dormitory. Ten people were in a room with bunk beds. Five of us Tibetan women lived with five Chinese women. We worked in that factory for three months. I was paid fifteen RMB an hour, and the company paid us at the end of each month.

Work varied. The longer you stayed, the higher your salary. If you wanted to work overtime, the relationship between you and your boss was the determining factor. The five of us stayed together except during work hours. I wasn't bored.

I was nervous and anxious every day because my Chinese is poor. Whenever the team leader assigned tasks to me, I was concerned that I wouldn't understand, so I was always alert. I was worried the boss would dismiss me if I did a poor job. I was cautious. Sometimes, when the team leader scolded me, I dared not reply. A girl from a herding area in Sichuan Province had gone to school and

was very bold. When the team leader scolded her, she quarreled with him. She was not afraid of him, unlike timid me. When a Chinese woman in the dormitory laughed at us for not speaking standard Mandarin, I was angry and said, "We grew up speaking Tibetan. Chinese is very difficult for us to learn. Would it be easy to learn if you were asked to speak Tibetan?"

A friend introduced my second husband. We often communicated on WeChat, and then we stayed together. I now have two sons with him. My ex-husband's family raised my son from my first marriage while I kept my daughter. My brother had two children. He and his wife wanted another child. After I cared for my daughter for six months, I gave her to them. My daughter calls them "mother" and "father" and thinks I'm her sister. My brother and sister-in-law treat her like their daughter, often buy her new clothes and toys, and take extra good care of her. I'm happy for her. After I married into my second husband's family, I often went out to work with him.

My current parents-in-law are traditional farmers who earn a living from a small amount of farmland, collecting caterpillar fungus, and working outside. A year after I married into their home, I went to Gser rta (Seda) County, Dkar mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, with my husband and parents-in-law to work in 'Brong ri Monastery, where my husband and his parents had been working for two years. I heard that an uncle of my husband's helped locate this job. We worked as assistant workers. Each of us was paid 120 RMB a day. We worked there for two months, carrying stones, building foundations with rocks, and so forth. The workers were local Tibetans and Chinese. My parents-in-law decided not to leave the village to work because many villagers were building new houses then. My husband and father-in-law were also thinking of doing the same, so a decision was made that my husband and I would go out and earn money while my parents-in-law would take care of the children and the farm.

Although we are farmers, we can't only make money by farming. We grow only enough crops to feed ourselves. We must provide for our children in school, support our parents, buy a car, build a new house, and the village headman often collects money.

For example, every family paid a few hundred RMB last year to make a village square. The village headman collects a fine if no family member attends the community *ma Ni* hall to chant during religious activities.

My husband and I have tried many ways to earn an income. We collected caterpillar fungus in Rma stod (Maduo) County, Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Each collector paid 10,000 RMB. Neither of us could find many, so we lost money that time. My husband is careless. How can he find caterpillar fungus when he sometimes can't even find what's in front of him?!

After losing money, we were ashamed to go home, so we planned to find a job in Mgo log Prefecture Town. We stayed in a small hotel for three days but didn't find work. In desperation, my husband and I went to Zi ling City. After two days, one of my husband's friends introduced us to a man in Na gor mo (Ge'ermu, Golmud) City, Haixi Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, who needed grass planters. He asked if we would like to go. We immediately agreed. When we arrived, we realized that the place was desert. There was not a single tree. Especially in the seventh lunar month, we felt it was hot as Hell. We lived in a tent and couldn't bear the temperature after work each day. It felt like we were in a steamer. During the day, we had to go to the desert to plant grass. Walking, we would get stuck in the sand, and our feet would get extra hot. Sometimes, sand got in our eyes and mouths when the wind blew.

After half a month, we couldn't bear the climate, so we gave up and returned to Zi ling. When we arrived, one of my husband's uncles introduced us to a job planting pine trees in Brag dkar (Xinghai) County that paid 130 RMB a day per person. The other workers were all local herders who came to work in the morning and left in the evening. I prepared breakfast, lunch, and dinner for about twenty people. I soon became pregnant. My parents-in-law learned this and insisted I return home.

Collecting caterpillar fungus is a risky endeavor, so my husband and I decided to learn a new skill. My husband's friend recommended we go to a restaurant in Lhasa City. We signed a

three-month contract with the boss stipulating that she would deduct 1,000 RMB from our salary of 4,000 RMB per person if we left early. We ate and lived in that little restaurant, which served A mdo noodles and other noodle dishes. There were ten tables, and business was good with a steady daily stream of customers. The daily income was about 10,000 RMB.

That job was tough. There were five of us with the owner, the owner's wife, and their son. I had to get up at six a.m. every day. Until eleven a.m., I washed and chopped vegetables – fifty kilograms of chili, zucchini, and so on. My husband was responsible for kneading the dough and making it into various shapes. The boss ordered us to have it ready by eleven a.m. After that, we could have breakfast. The boss was mean and gave us a small amount of poor-quality food. By noon, there were many customers. Many thought the A mdo noodles were delicious. The business was perfect. Other restaurants used machines to make noodles. However, the owner insisted it was better to make them by hand, so my husband, the owner's wife, and I pulled the noodles by hand. I felt my hands were going to break when there were forty customers. It was midnight when I finished washing all the dishes. The boss's wife would then tell me to cut the meat for the next day and clean. It was one a.m. when I could finally rest.

After two and a half months, my husband received a message from his father that one of his uncles had passed away and asked him to hurry home to attend the funeral. My boss's wife was unhappy and took her anger out on me. When I said I wanted a good meal, the boss's wife sarcastically said I was asking for too much. Sometimes, she scolded me for laziness when I took an extended break and threatened to dock my wages. When I thought about this, I didn't want to keep working and told my boss's wife I was quitting.

She angrily deducted 1,000 RMB from each of us because we were leaving early. She said, "You can go to court and sue me if you two don't accept this."

I knew I was wrong and said nothing. As I got ready to go home, I couldn't even buy a ticket online. No one could help, so I

had to ask the owner's wife. She was reluctant to let me go because they couldn't find a server quickly, and their business was good.

My husband and I didn't want to work there. We slept on cramped wire beds and couldn't eat on time every day. There was also endless work to do. After I begged my boss to buy my ticket, he drove me to the train station. I took the train back to Zi ling alone. I didn't know how to read Chinese, so I had to ask others for help. I met some Chinese workers at the train station who were going to Zi ling. They helped me and I was very grateful.

I transferred to a bus to Xunhua County when I got to Zi ling.

This was the first time I took a train by myself, so I felt I was good at speaking Chinese, though I didn't recognize Chinese characters. If I hadn't gone out to work and had experience in learning Chinese, I wouldn't have been able to find a train station. Now that my Chinese is slightly better, I'm not scared to go to a big city alone.

After working in a restaurant, my husband and I were naive enough to think that we could open a restaurant and make a lot of money, so we rented a restaurant in Gcig sgril (Jiuzhi) County, Mgo log Prefecture. We lost money after six months of operation. The county is small. I saw few people on the street, and herders didn't want to eat A mdo noodles. However, a noodle shop run by a Xunhua Salar couple was doing well. They said they had been in business for many years.

After losing money, we were afraid to do business again.

A regular job is the only way for both of us. There is no risk or worry like collecting caterpillar fungus or running a restaurant. Just finish the day's work and get paid. In the past three years, we have been in Zi ling City looking for construction work. Unlike herding areas in winter, where the land freezes and stops work, year-round employment in Zi ling meant we each earned almost 60,000 RMB a year.

At the beginning of spring 2019, we visited Zi ling City to look for work at construction sites. Luckily, we found an easy job working as electrical line workers, installing lines in every apartment in a building. My husband was paid 180 RMB a day, and I was paid



160 RMB. About fifteen buildings were under construction. Each was thirty-two stories high. Many people were working on them. About thirty to forty people were team leaders, and 300 employees were under one team leader. We went to work in the morning. All the workers swiped their cards to enter the construction site. Many security guards were around us. Once we arrived at the workplace, the team leader assigned tasks for the day. The team leader usually separated my husband and me. I followed one worker, and my husband followed another. My tasks were to assist the worker with whatever they needed, including lifting tools, drills, cords, etc. If you worked overtime at night, you worked until two or three a.m.

Every day, I followed a different worker. When the worker was from Sichuan Province, I didn't understand his dialect when he asked me for something. He would then get angry, and I was too scared to ask him to repeat it.

When I met a better-tempered worker, they got their things independently and didn't scold me. You could rest only if the worker rested. Some workers bullied me, ordering me to do this and that when they found a chance to rest. I purposely didn't listen.

Once, when I was done with work and about to leave, two workers came and ordered me to get to work. I said I didn't have time and left, even though we knew each other well. They got angry, treated me poorly afterward, and often called me an idiot.

We had to work on our feet every day. We rarely sat. The supervisor wore a white hat and monitored us. He was responsible for determining if we were lazy and the work was done according to plan. He would take a photograph and send it to your team leader, who would reduce your salary if you were lazy or not doing a good job.

Fortunately, we never had an accident. I often reminded my husband to stay safe. We didn't sign a contract with the boss, so I took care of minor injuries myself. Major injuries were up to the boss to deal with. The team leader once arranged for me to ride a three-wheeled electric scooter at night to carry items from the elevator to the upper floors. I knew it was dark and dangerous at night, so I refused. I had heard about a woman from Dp'a lung (Hualong) Hui

Autonomous County who drove an electric cart to the elevator at night and fell to her death because it was dark and the elevator was unfinished.

Unpaid wages were worse. When we had worked for three months and were ready to go home to harvest, the contractor said there was no money in their project and would pay us when it became available. We had no choice but to go home and wait for a month. We called the boss daily, asking for the 20,000 RMB owed to us. We nearly sued them in court. Thankfully, the money was eventually paid. I heard that some workers didn't receive their money.

Whenever we went home, I fought with the employers instead of being happy with the money I had earned. We argued and urged them to pay us and went home in despair. So many painful memories. We worked hard for our money, but they dismissed us by saying there was no money. This money was the most critical income we had in a year.

Because of Covid-19 in 2022, many construction companies stopped, and my husband and I had difficulty finding work. At first, we got jobs in buildings under construction near the Zi ling Train Station. We were paid 200 RMB salary each per day and stayed in a painted metal room. I lived in the women's dormitory on the second floor.

Meals were the company's responsibility initially, but after a week, the boss said that we should deal with our food and that he would add twenty RMB a day to everyone's daily account. There were six workers. I followed them to the basement to remove old wires and bring new ones or hand them pliers and tape they asked for. Sometimes, there was not much to do, and the boss didn't constantly supervise you. We worked there for a month, though the outside of the Train Station was closed. When the epidemic became severe after two months, the company shut down.

At that time, all of Zi ling was blocked. We could not go home. We stayed in a cheap hotel, but it was not a solution, so we looked for a job and finally found a job in a construction site next to Wanda Plaza pouring concrete on floor heating pipes. Due to the pandemic,

we were only allowed to work at night and rest during the day, so we started at six p.m. The concrete was poured out of a black pipe from a truck. Two workers carried a heavy concrete pipe. Others held the head of the tube with a rope and poured the concrete onto the pipes. When we finished working, it was five to eight a.m. We slept in bunk beds in the company's metal room during the day. There were only four workers then. The boss couldn't find people due to the epidemic, so we four workers had to do all the work.

The boss was incredibly kind to us. We were each paid 280 RMB daily. After we had worked for ten days, the epidemic regulations became stricter, so we had to stop working. Two workers from Shanxi Province immediately packed their things and took the train home. My husband and I were unable to return home. We were stuck in the company's dormitory for more than twenty days.

We couldn't buy food and trusted our boss to buy something for us. We asked him to buy two boxes of instant noodles and a small electric cooker to save money. We slept until eleven a.m., so we didn't have to eat breakfast. When we got up, we cooked instant noodles in an electric cooker and ate. Luckily, a fellow villager ran a steamed bun shop in Zi ling. My husband begged him to send us some steamed buns and milk.

In the eleventh lunar month, the dormitory had no heating or sunlight. I could only sleep every day. I could not sleep without plugging in the electric blanket, which broke after I plugged it in repeatedly every day. My husband said it wasn't good for us to lie around every day, so we chanted and prayed the epidemic life would end.

Later, the boss left in a private car to his home. He was very generous. He left his pots and pans with us and gave us 200 RMB to buy food. We stuck around for a while after buying food with that money. We contacted some friends through cell phones and heard that some people had walked to Xunhua County from Zi ling. They said it took three days and three nights. When I thought about how cold it was in winter, I thought, "What if we freeze to death on the road, get caught by the police, and have to pay a fine, or be forced into quarantine or something?"

We were afraid to go home. Our fellow villager who owned the bun shop advised us not to walk home. He suggested we rent a car to go home. My husband and I had a lot of work certificates at the construction site. After packing our things, we lived in the fellow-villager's shop with only one small room separated by a curtain. The fellow and his wife sold buns at the front counter while their two kids had internet classes on their cell phones behind the curtain. After selling buns, they packed their things for the next day's trip home.

The next day, we encountered many checkpoints on the road. Policemen would not let us pass, demanding that we have a certificate from Wendu Township certifying that we had the township government's consent. We had no choice but to call the company's owner and ask him to explain it to the policemen. Still, they wouldn't let us go, so we had no choice but to return to the shop where the couple busily made buns. We were very embarrassed to stay in the store.

I did not know when we could go home. That year, we only went home for six days to harvest the crops. I especially missed my two sons. When I thought about it, I was desperate and helpless. I cried all night. My husband and the couple comforted me, telling me not to worry too much, that everything would pass. After a day in the store, a friend called and said the road would be unblocked that night. We did not believe it, but after asking others, we realized it was true, so we said goodbye to the couple and left.

My husband said we might have to go to another city to look for jobs the next year because we felt it would be difficult to find work in Zi ling. The bosses look for men when you look for a job in Zi ling. They will ask women if they can read and speak Chinese. If you cannot, they consider if you are with your husband. If so, they accept you. If you look for a job alone, they won't accept you.

I have learned from my work experience that even if you are a woman who doesn't know Chinese characters, your boss will want you as long as you are hardworking and work seriously. Whenever I started a new job, I worked extra hard, so the boss believed in my ability to work and liked me. He would then want to keep me on. I

made earnest efforts to get the boss's affirmation. A boss never said I did not do a good job, nor was I fired. They all liked me, praised my work, and wanted me to remain on the job. For example, one boss arranged for me to work alone in a dark and scary basement. I was scared, but I never said I wouldn't go. I dared finish the job while looking behind me in fear.

Secondly, bosses will choose long-term workers over short-term workers. The bosses wouldn't want to hire us if we said we would stay two to three months. We understood that the bosses wanted long-term, reliable employees rather than always looking for new people. We said we were willing to work for a long time, but the truth was that we had to return home to help our family harvest, or something urgent made us leave. Finally, we lacked skills.

Last year, I met a Chinese man with his wife and parents. The man told me that the whole family earned 30,000 RMB a month, each had a skill, and they didn't go home for a year.

Bosses advised us that we won't make much money as laborers. It's a job with no future. I persuaded my husband to learn a skill, but he has no interest in construction and is unwilling to learn. I have no choice but to work and obey others' commands. My husband has a junior high school education. I do not. I would learn some skills if I knew how to read and write. But now I can only follow my husband to look for work. When I had to scan QR codes on my cell phone during last year's pandemic, I needed his help registering my information. He taught me how to write my name in Chinese characters.

All the money we earned was used to finish building two sides of a new house. The other two sides and the yard remain to be made. It cost more than 300,000 RMB to build this much of the house. My husband and I gave all our money to my father-in-law, who decided how the money would be used. Women like me love to buy new clothes and cosmetics, but I dared not allow myself such enjoyment. I was always concerned about saving money for the family. New Tibetan robes cost hundreds of RMB. If my husband doesn't buy one for me, I won't have the money to buy one. I usually buy clothes that cost fifty-sixty RMB. Last year, I secretly purchased

190 RMB of cosmetics. I didn't dare tell my husband and mother-in-law the real price. I lied and said they were fifty RMB. They wouldn't agree to spending money on expensive cosmetics.

When my husband and I work outside, we're cautious about buying our favorite fruits or eating in restaurants. Sometimes, we don't have any cash and must rely on our bosses to pay our salaries. I kept the money others gave my child during the New Year. I lacked pocket money. As a daughter-in-law, I'm supposed to be well-behaved, save all my money, and spend it on the family.

All women become daughters-in-law one day. My mother and brother chose my first in-laws and sent me to my husband's home with the idea that they would treat me like family, love me, and care for me. If your in-laws love and care about you, you must be grateful and return the favor. However, which daughter-in-law has no suffering?

My current mother-in-law and I live under one roof, and a little disagreement can be carried in my heart for a long time. My mother-in-law is very unreasonable. As long as I am at home, she does no chores and does not help me. If I argue with her, my husband is in the middle and helpless. I pity him. I don't say anything. I endure it. It's challenging for my parents-in-law to care for two children while working on the farm at home. I understand. I don't discuss family matters with people in the village. The village is so small that if I speak to others about my family matters, they gossip, and my mother-in-law will know about it.

I never say anything bad about my mother-in-law when I am in my natal home. It's not easy for my mother to be on her own. I don't want her to worry. I have no father, and my mother has no company. I wouldn't be so afraid of my in-laws if I had a father. My father would help me talk to my in-laws and say, "Please treat my daughter nicely."

If my family is happy, I will not feel miserable even if I go out to work. If my family is not harmonious, it will be more miserable for me as a daughter-in-law who must go out to work.

## ACCOUNT TWO: Mtsho mo (b. 1988)

After arriving in Mgo log Prefecture Town at night, my husband and I heard that the local government and herders had set up many roadblocks to collect caterpillar fungus tax and restrict the flow of people from outside the area. If caught, you would be charged thousands of RMB in tax or banished from Mgo log Prefecture. However, some herders sought to profit from their grassy hills. After my husband and I paid a local herder almost 10,000 RMB, he agreed to clandestinely allow us to stay on his grassy hill in Snowy Mountain Township.

Nearly twenty of us sat in the back of the herder's big truck that night. Everyone wore headlamps. We all crammed in with our luggage. We were shaken like a load of hogs. The driver instructed us to disembark from the truck at each roadblock immediately, walk a short distance ahead, and then meet him at a designated place. He warned us to move quickly so we would not be caught. I don't know how long we sat in that bouncing, shaking truck. When it suddenly stopped, the driver exited and raced to us. He said his friend had been arrested at an intersection roadblock ahead of us. He told us to leave the truck quickly, walk to a mountain road junction, and be there because he would not wait for stragglers.

Everyone in the back of the truck began scrambling, pushing, and shoving to exit the truck after he finished speaking. Some people bumped into one another since it was so dark. I couldn't see if others were carrying their luggage. I held my duffel bag with food, cooking oil, noodles, spices, and meat. Everyone moved hectically and as fast as possible. I also carried a backpack while running. After reaching our destination, everyone hurriedly boarded the truck again. Some pushed and pulled me, hurting me.

The driver stopped the truck again and told us to get off. Others jumped out and marched together like before. Just as I was about to jump out of the truck, I was afraid my shoes would get wet, so I took them off. After crossing the stream by jumping and walking, I found it difficult to climb up the bank while carrying my backpack. Eventually, I made it. I was now weak.

I put on my shoes and got ready to run, but I couldn't find my socks. I knew I didn't have time to search for them. Looking around, I discovered that my husband was no longer with me. Afraid of getting lost, I ran desperately until I caught up with several Chinese. My shoes had heels, so I kept tripping. While following the Chinese, my husband suddenly appeared. He repeatedly said my name and pulled me. I was angry and wondered why he wouldn't wait for or accompany me. Wasn't he afraid that I would get lost? Afterward, I ignored him. He offered to take my bag but I did not give it to him. Still, he accompanied me as I walked, and I felt more at ease.

I don't remember how many times we got off and on the truck. I fell many times that night. As dawn approached, the driver instructed us to find a hiding spot during the day to avoid detection, promising to pick us up that night. Half of us spent the day under a bridge. It had snowed. There was ice and water. Everyone was tired from running all night and slept. I couldn't sleep because my feet were cold, so I removed my shoes and covered them with my hands to make them warmer. We ate buns and pickles we had brought. In the late afternoon, we contacted the driver. After he picked us up, we resumed our efforts to avoid checkpoints.

That night proved particularly challenging. It started raining heavily as we entered a dark, rugged valley. When the driver made another stop, we jumped out of the truck without our luggage and began walking to where the driver had indicated. One woman became too exhausted to continue walking. A few people pulled her. We climbed a hill. As we descended, a big river appeared before us. Our initial intention was to cross, but then we noticed a checkpoint and someone surveying the area with a flashlight. No one knew what to do. A man called the driver and asked what to do. The driver made fun of us, "You cowards should avoid the checkpoints by crossing the river."

We then had no choice. Despite the rain, some people walked across the river holding hands. The water reached their thighs. I held my husband's hand, and we waded across. Though we succeeded in crossing the river, our happiness was short-lived.



Several tents blocked our path. I saw a man smoking inside a car. As we snuck through the rain, he exited the vehicle. My heart raced in panic. Fortunately, he only returned to his tent with a flashlight. I exhaled deeply and continued crawling on my belly. We advanced, dodging checkpoints and climbing over wire fences, ensuring we were not being followed before stopping to rest. As we waited, I realized we were stuck in a tangle of buckthorn bushes. Our clothes and faces were covered with sea buckthorn juice, and we couldn't find a way out. After a night of running, everyone fell asleep in exhaustion. We had to remain hidden during the day and didn't dare go outside of the buckthorn bushes in fear someone might notice us. That day, my feet were cold despite covering them with my hands. When it got dark, the driver arrived to pick us up and took us to his family's grassy hill.

The landowner expressed surprise that we had avoided the checkpoints and offered to bring a group to his family's grassy hill the following day. We spent the night in their tent. The next day, we carried our bags to a location where we were less likely to be seen at checkpoints. I initially struggled to collect caterpillar fungus. It wasn't until four or five days later that I got used to the terrain that I began to make progress. We constantly collected caterpillar fungus, and when people from the checkpoints came looking for us, we had to elude them.

After twenty days, my husband and I decided to leave due to the unbearable conditions. We packed our bags, carried them from the mountain to the road, and hired a herdsman to transport us back to Mgo log Prefecture Town. A single caterpillar fungus sold for fifteen RMB at that time. After selling what we had tirelessly searched for, my husband and I were able to regain what we had spent to search the land. Ten thousand RMB remained. This was my first experience collecting caterpillar fungus with my husband. I was nineteen.

My husband's family had proposed marriage to me a year earlier when I was eighteen. My father accepted after drinking the liquor they had brought. I had never met my future husband and was reluctant to marry a stranger. That year, many villagers started

going out to work. My father planned to follow some villagers to look for work. After the fall harvest, I begged my father to take me with him, naively thinking that if I could earn money for my family, my parents would not have to marry me off.

My father, three other people from the same village, and I went to Zi ling City together. We found work at the railway station replacing old wooden ties in the railway tracks. We were arranged to live in a five-story workers' dormitory. The rooms were clean, and the cafeteria food was good. We had to get up at five a.m. and work in groups of five. Each person had to change five ties. The ties were heavy, and it was hard for women to lift a tie.

Our boss disliked women and often scolded us for our lack of strength. One day, my aunt got her finger caught in a wooden tie. The boss then declared women were a nuisance and forced my aunt and me to leave. We were paid thirty-five RMB a day and had worked for half a month.

My father and my aunt's husband continued working. We didn't want to go home so early, so my aunt suggested we find waitress jobs. I agreed. We applied to several restaurants, but only one, a particularly large hot pot restaurant in Ximen Mall, was willing to hire us. Aunt and I couldn't read Chinese and spoke only a little simple Chinese. The restaurant manager told us to clean the bowls of food after the customers left and stand in the lobby. Fifty restaurant attendants worked there, and most of them were women. We started at ten a.m. and finished at midnight. We got one day off a week. My aunt and I lived in a large dormitory with ten people and one heater. We didn't have electric mattresses. The beds were cold. Sometimes, I went shopping but couldn't afford to buy food. I longed for a red bean cake sold on the streets.

I stayed for two months. When it was almost New Year, I called home. My mother said I didn't have to marry that man, so I went home. When I arrived, I realized my mother had lied. My family had prepared everything for the wedding. There were Tibetan robes, coral necklaces, etc. I was to be married on the fifth day of the New Year.

As a rural woman who never attended school, I had to obey my parents before I married. After I married, I had to obey my husband, who is two years older than me and has only a fifth-grade primary school education. Even when we look for work, we can only find manual labor with dirt and stones.

A woman who has attended school and obtained higher education can take exams for state employment and have the opportunity to work to earn a salary without relying on her husband. I'm like a yak without horns. I regret not getting an education, but I'm no fool. It's just a bad time for women of my generation. My parents didn't think girls needed to attend school. They thought women just needed to marry well.

Every year, I accompany my husband in collecting caterpillar fungus. We can collect caterpillar fungus, but more and more people can now do the same. Herdsmen allow more people to make more money from the land fee. They don't care if we find caterpillar fungus. The high land fee and the hardships of avoiding checkpoints made us do something more adventurous.

One year, we went to Mgo log Prefecture to collect caterpillar fungus, following a group of villagers. Some had been secretly collecting caterpillar fungus for two years. We arrived by van at Dar lag (Dari) County in Mgo log Prefecture. When we reached the base of a mountain, a knowledgeable man informed us that we could cross the mountain to collect caterpillar fungus on the other side illegally. My husband, four other people, and I, each carrying large packs filled with mattresses and food, got out of the truck and started to climb the mountain. The path leading up the mountain was extremely narrow. We walked along the cliff's edge with a large river below us. I proceeded cautiously, carrying a heavy backpack. My husband pushed me when I couldn't climb. Sometimes, I was on my hands and knees. If you weren't careful, you might fall into the river. I heard about a man carrying a heavy bag. He slipped and fell to his death when the sack's rope went around his neck and strangled him.

The river was so loud I couldn't hear other people. Cliffs and forests were on both sides. We made it safely over the big mountain

the first night but were blocked by the big river. We were exhausted from walking all day, so we pitched our tents by the river and rested.

The next morning, we saw a few people carrying heavy bags like us, trying to figure out how to cross the river to reach the other side. A few men sawed down a large tree, positioned it over the river, and put up a rope to hold onto when crossing. I held the rope as I slowly crawled on the log across the river. The river flowed rapidly below. As I approached the other side, a couple following me with too much baggage fell into the rushing water. People quickly noticed, and there was commotion all around. Eventually, they washed into a river valley. Fortunately, everyone worked together to rescue them.

Once on the mountain's opposite side, we noticed it was not frequently patrolled. We peeled bark from the trees, spread it on the ground, and set up our tents. After building mud stoves, we collected wood to make a fire. We collected for two days and learned the police were coming to evict us. During the day, we moved the tents, concealed all the food in a pit covered with pine branches, fled into the woods, and hid. At nightfall, we returned to pitch the tents and sleep.

One night, policemen suddenly appeared. My husband and I hastily hid our tent and luggage, followed an acquaintance into a cave in the dark, and spent the night there. Five of us heard others outside running about, searching for a hiding place. The night was so dark they could not locate one another and shouted their names. I heard a man say that 500 people like us must be in this valley. We hid in the cave and didn't feel safe enough to return to our tent until the next afternoon. We fearfully collected like this every day for a few more days.

Whenever I started to hide, I brought some of my cooked flour, instant noodles, soybeans, and dry buns to eat. I used an empty bottle to catch melted water from the ice in the cave. We took turns drinking, but there wasn't enough water. We couldn't sleep in the caves at night. There wasn't enough space. We had to share with four or five others. It was cold and uncomfortable. When we returned to our tent the next day, the area was full of tents, pots, pans, and food scraps left by people who had decided they couldn't

endure it any longer. My husband, the remaining ten couples, and I stayed behind for about fifteen days before moving to another mountain.

One night, we learned that the police were on their way again. My husband told me to grab our bag of caterpillar fungus and follow a relative who supposedly knew a secure hiding spot. He made it clear that I should follow this person until the end. It was almost dark.

I packed my bags and realized my husband was missing. I took my caterpillar fungus bag and went to look for my relative. Many others in the valley were hiding from the police. When I arrived at my relatives' tent, no one was there. I panicked and looked for people. Luckily, others in the valley were also running around. I asked if anyone had seen my relatives, and after a while, I found them. As I walked close behind five of them, an older relative urged me not to follow them. He lied that others had a good place to hide. The night was dark and scary, and I did not know anyone apart from them. I sensed he didn't want me to follow them. I couldn't figure out who they were following. I ignored him and followed them. Six of us squeezed into a cave where we were hungry, thirsty, and cramped. The inside of the cave was small and full of dirt. Everyone was so cramped that we were nearly kissing each other.

Sitting opposite me was a woman whose husband had recently passed away. As she faced me and inhaled and exhaled, I felt uneasy. We locals think widows have bad luck. When we were next to each other, breathing together, I worried she would aggravate my already bad eyes.

As time passed, one of the older men said there seemed to be no sound outside, went out to check, came back inside the cave, and said that no one was close outside, but added he saw policemen take several people away. I was worried my husband was among those taken away. I begged the widow to accompany me back to the tent to see what was happening, and she agreed.

We went to our tent, where there were some people. When I asked if anyone had seen my husband, someone said, "Your

husband is over there talking to someone," which relieved me greatly.

When I met my husband, I asked him where he had gone alone and told him how worried I had been. He didn't seem at all worried about me. We stayed and collected caterpillar fungus for a few more days.

A few days later, everyone was preparing to move to another mountain, so my husband went ahead to occupy a place to pitch our tent. I was left to walk slowly behind with our luggage on my back. It was raining heavily that day. My clothes were soaked, and I couldn't keep up with the others. A woman companion walking with me said, "Let's walk slowly. How can we keep up with those in front of us? They are all crazy," then she wept.

I also sobbed as I walked. After walking for the entire day, my husband was waiting for me with the tent pitched near the river. Since no one could cross the river, we decided to stop and continue our journey the following morning.

The next morning, someone positioned a log across the river, and everyone began slowly crossing it. I observed a man climbing the log in front of me, so I followed him. If someone was in front of me, I wouldn't feel dizzy. I followed him for a bit and then fell into the river. Everyone came to my rescue.

My husband angrily called me stupid for walking after someone else.

When we got to the valley, everybody scrambled for a place to pitch their tents and searched for branches to make a fire. My bag with food and flour fell into the water, so my husband and I had to borrow food from our relatives. After several days of collecting caterpillar fungus, a person kept cautioning the police might intervene, encouraging us to leave. Some said we should leave before something happened. Others said, "We have all persisted until now. We must continue."

It rained for a few days. My feet were so cold I couldn't sleep at night. I put my feet in a plastic bag and wrapped them in my clothes, but they were frostbitten the next day.

Another rainy night. The rain and thunder were very loud and scary. In the middle of the night, we heard a loud bang that I felt was an earthquake. I was terrified and wanted to rush out of the tent. However, my husband held me by the hair and ordered me to take cover inside the tent.

After the rain stopped, my husband checked outside and reported that a mudslide had crashed into the river. We were afraid to leave the tent and remained indoors for some days. Conditions were so scary we gave up and went home.

In addition to collecting caterpillar fungus, my husband and I do other work outside our village. After I had three children and was about twenty-five, I went with my husband to find my first job.

B couple from our village worked at a construction site in Ziling City and accompanied us to a large construction site with ten buildings. Each had thirty-three floors. Our boss and most of the workers were from Sichuan.

We installed underfloor heating and poured cement over the underfloor heating pipes.

There were a couple of Chinese women in their forties and fifties. We women lived in a dormitory room. Perhaps the boss thought women were of no use. Initially, he assigned us to do some work. After a few weeks, he stopped giving us women any tasks. I couldn't understand the boss's and the other workers' Sichuan accents. He called me an idiot. After twenty days, the boss fired us. He said there were too many people, and he needed to lay off staff. My husband and husband B stayed at the construction site to continue working while I went home with B's wife.

I started harvesting soon after I got home. After forty days of work, my husband returned home to help me. He told me he had informed the Sichuan boss that he had to harvest and rest and intended to return to work after harvest. I was happy to hear that but worried about what I would do without my husband. He assured me that he would beg his boss to hire me. The boss then agreed to let me work there.

Surprisingly, I was the only female worker there except for the boss's wife. The employees were men between forty and in their

sixties. B got into an argument with the boss because the boss didn't pay him on time, so he quit and left. As a result, my husband and I were the only Tibetans at the site.

Since female employees had no accommodation, my husband and I slept in a man's dormitory room. The bunks could only accommodate one person. We had to add an extra board and crowd together to sleep. Ten other men in the dorm suggested we buy a curtain and hang it over our bed. They said they were a bit embarrassed. I slept near a window so the other men couldn't see me.

In the beginning, I hardly talked to these men. My Chinese is poor, and I couldn't understand their Sichuan dialect. Perhaps due to their maturity, they were cautious around me, wearing shirts and pants in the dorm and refraining from walking bare-chested or behaving inappropriately towards me. I was so helpless and bored every day that I thought I would never work there again.

We ate in a big cafeteria with rice, chicken, and cabbage. Many people lined up to get food when at mealtime. We had green (ten RMB) and red (five RMB) meal tickets. We gave the server a ticket and chose the food we wanted. My husband told me to buy food because he knew I was afraid to speak Chinese, and in ten days, I became very proficient at buying food.

Every morning, we woke up at six-twenty a.m., had breakfast in the cafeteria, and then gathered at our workplace for our morning shift. There were no toilet breaks. I finished my work at noon, had lunch, and started the afternoon shift at one-thirty p.m. There was no designated noon break. I finished my shift at seven p.m. The time after that was my own.

In the first month, the team leader assigned me to follow Chinese workers who were responsible for laying rebars on the basement floor. I tied the rebar with thin wire in two layers with hand pliers. For the remaining two months, the workers poured concrete on the basement floor, and I used tools to spread the concrete. That's all I did in those three months.

My husband was responsible for pouring concrete on each building floor, so concrete splattered him every day. Daily contact



with Chinese workers familiarized me with them and the working environment. The boss also took good care of us. He praised my husband and me for being hardworking and doing a good job. Every time we ate, he encouraged us to eat a little more. Even though his wife told him to mind his business, he ignored her. It's good when a boss urges you to eat more for dinner.

Occasionally, he scolded us. When a machine broke down and couldn't be repaired for half a day, the boss would especially scold us for resting on the side and not working. He also scolded us if we worked slowly or didn't do much work.

My husband and I worked from the ninth to the eleventh lunar months, and then we returned home. We could have continued working like the Chinese until the Spring Festival. The boss also advised us to stay on, but we had to go home. My parents-in-law and three children were at home. My husband and I couldn't work away from home for long periods and ignore our family.

After a month of waiting at home, our wages were put on the bank cards. The boss said the company's project department lacked the money to pay us promptly. We didn't push the boss. We wrote a certificate with the boss that served as proof of an outstanding payment, put the bank card numbers on it, signed it, and then returned home. After a month at home, my husband called the boss. We both had worked for three months. My husband earned 160 RMB a day, and I earned 140 RMB a day. Almost 30,000 RMB was then transferred to our bank cards. We then felt this boss was reliable, so we worked with him for four years. Even though he didn't pay the monthly salary on time, my husband and I were sometimes paid 500 or 1,000 RMB a month in advance for living expenses if we lacked money or had an emergency.

In the fifth year, the boss told us that his project in Zi ling was finished and suggested we go to Lanzhou City to continue working. Even though Lanzhou is near Zi ling, this was my first time out of the province. I didn't know Chinese characters, so I stayed close to my husband. We took a train there. We almost got lost when we reached Lanzhou because we took a bus in the wrong direction. Luckily, our new boss was nice, patiently explained how to get to the

proper bus, and said he would wait for us at the construction site. He happily greeted us when we arrived, impressing us.

Most Lanzhou laborers had worked in Zi ling, so I was familiar with them and their Sichuan dialect. I was in charge of the cement mixer. After a driver unloaded a truckload of cement bags on the ground, a laborer and I needed to dump each bag into the mixer. I periodically added water during the mixing process to ensure consistency. Sometimes, I needed to sign a receipt when the driver unloaded the cement bags. I am illiterate, so I had to ask someone to read or sign the receipt each time.

Working in Lanzhou, where the weather was warm, was great compared to working in Zi ling. The boss raised both of our salaries. My husband was paid 250 RMB a day, and I was paid 150 RMB a day. We did not sign a contract with our boss when we worked on the Zi ling site. When we were in Lanzhou, our boss said we had to sign a contract to protect our safety, attend meetings, and have personal safety training about workers' rights and interests.

I was the only woman working at that site. Though I had become familiar with the Sichuan workers, I was lonely and bored. I had no cell phone because I spent most of my time with my husband. I was unfamiliar with Chinese characters, so I did not ask my husband to buy me one.

When I was working in Lanzhou, my husband's grandfather passed away, so my husband had to go home for the funeral, leaving me alone at the construction site. I dared not go anywhere by myself for almost ten days. I stayed alone in the dormitory after work. I stayed alone, slept without a cell phone every day, and avoided chatting with the workers.

My husband and I went home after three months in Lanzhou. We took the boss's car when we returned to Zi ling. While my husband and I were getting ready to join the Sichuan boss the next year, his daughter informed us that he had drowned in his family fishpond and her husband had taken over his work. My husband and I wished to continue working, so we had to follow the new boss's arrangements. He was strict. When he heard that I was illiterate, he

said there was no suitable work for me and refused to allow me to accompany my husband to work. I then had no choice but to stay home while my husband continued to work at a Xi'an construction site for a year.

The new boss was very strict, frequently assigned heavy tasks, and gave him little time to rest. He also cursed a lot, further prompting my husband to leave.

I understand my husband because we followed the Sichuan boss for years, had become friends, and he allowed me, a woman, to join my husband in his work. My husband and I were very grateful.

Later, my husband and I resumed job hunting. One year, my husband followed a Chinese boss to work in Yinchuan City, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. The boss did not accept illiterate women like me, so I followed a young couple from our village to work in a cement factory in Dga' bde (Gande) County, Mgo log Prefecture. That was a tiring, heavy job compared to what I had done in Zi ling. While working in Zi ling, I was given lighter tasks because I was a woman. However, in my new job, the boss treated me like a male employee, expecting me to carry fifty bags of cement a day. Each bag weighed fifty kilograms. Though the work was the same, women were paid fifty RMB a day less than men. I got about 150 RMB a day. No matter how hard I worked, I did not get compliments from the boss. Without my husband, I was just a single woman there. Some workers said, "It's sad you're working here alone."

The boss intentionally gave me additional tasks since I had no spouse to support and defend me.

The wife of the young couple from our village was the cook. She washed and chopped vegetables before meals for the entire workforce of more than 200 people. She had to rinse the workers' used dishes in cold water for long periods. After a month of work, she was unable to work normally because of menstrual cramps and severe pain in her lower back and abdomen. He agreed when she told the boss she needed a break but deliberately deducted her wages for the five days she had taken off. We female employees asked the boss to consider menstrual cramps as a workplace injury, as frequent exposure to cold water led to illness. He refused. I am

thankful my menstrual cramps aren't serious, especially after having three children. I don't feel discomfort when I have my period. I pay attention to my physical well-being and avoid contact with cold water as much as possible.

We worked in poor conditions, lacking comfortable sleeping arrangements and immediate access to hot water. Many women think it is shameful to talk about menstruation. When experiencing menstrual cramps, you must care for yourself because others may not provide the necessary care.

After working for years, I don't want to go to work with my grumpy husband, who scolds me and loses his temper when I don't obey him. Sometimes, he misunderstood me and suspected there were feelings between me and male workers. We would then quarrel or not speak to each other for days. He would go out with the male co-workers when we were off work or on break but wouldn't tell me beforehand. Even when we went shopping together, and he bought whatever he wanted, he didn't care what I thought, ignoring my feelings and opinions.

On one occasion in Zi ling, our Sichuan bosses arranged for us to sleep alone in the company warehouse in a dark, cold, dimly lit basement. We both slept in a small room with a bed. Every night, we heard mice running around. I was afraid to sleep there without my husband. However, my husband sometimes didn't return after eating, drinking, and playing cards with his male coworkers. I hated that he left me alone, and I cannot forget the nights I was alone, cold, and afraid. I didn't have a cell phone at night. I was desperate, but I had to rely on him. Whenever we quarreled, I would say, "I don't want to go to work with you."

He angrily replied, "You can go to work without me, but you have to make as much money as I do."

He was forcing me to follow him. How could I, an illiterate woman, make as much as a man? I can only speak simple Chinese. When I work outside, I have to follow other people. I wouldn't rely on others if I could read.

In addition to following my husband to collect caterpillar fungus and work, I was also a daughter-in-law married into another

family. I had to stay home, do farm work, do housework, and care for my aging parents-in-law. My three children attended the boarding middle school in Bis mdo Town. I work outside most of the year and spend little time with my children, who spend a lot of time with their grandparents and have a better relationship with them than I do.

Working at home is more mentally and physically demanding than working outside. At home, I must cook, wash dishes, and do farm work daily. Even rainy days are not rest days for me. As a daughter-in-law, you cannot be lazy. Otherwise, your parents-in-law and some outsiders in the village might judge you. Every day at home, I do chores and farm work.

In contrast, going out to work gives me some freedom. As long as I finish my daily tasks, I can relax at the end of the day. At home, I have to deal with my parents-in-law. Outside, I can wear my favorite clothes, use cosmetics, and style my hair.

### ACCOUNT Three: Sgrol ma (b. 1983)

I have eight siblings. I am the youngest daughter. My mother has been married twice. Both husbands are deceased. She was fifteen when she first married. After two children, her first husband was tragically killed by a building that collapsed in heavy rain. My mother's family then arranged for her to marry her husband's brother. She had seven children with him.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), my mother's second husband, my father, worked with a local incarnation *bla ma*, who was tortured and criticized by villagers and passed away. My mother was in her forties when my father died. I was two years old. My mother and grandparents raised all of us. Only one of my brothers could attend a government school, while the rest had to work for the family. Very few children attended school at that time. Most stayed at home to work, especially the girls. Every day after breakfast, my mother sent me to work. We kids just thought about how to have fun. I walked to a stream with a basket on my back, collected cow dung, and put it in the basket while discussing what

game to play with my partners. Sometimes, we spent all day by the river playing with *the ge* 'sheep ankle bones' until our hands and clothes were covered with dirt. We reluctantly went home when our mothers came to call us.

Sometimes, I went home, dumped a basket full of cow dung on the ground, and returned to the woods to play shuttlecock with my friends after lunch. After dinner, we ran out of the house and went with friends to a grove by the river, climbed trees to break branches, picked up branches on the ground, and made a bonfire. When a small group gathered around the campfire, we asked the older ones to tell stories, and we were so engrossed in the stories that we forgot to hurry home. When a storyteller said he would leave, we would grab his leg and not let him go. We promised two candies if he would tell a story.

I saved the candy given by adults on New Year's Eve to give to storytellers. Looking back, I was addicted to playing, doing few chores, and running out to play until dark. My mother would yell at me to come home. If I came home late, I would be beaten.

Childhood went by without a care. At sixteen, I started working with a shovel first. Thinking about the family's poor economic conditions, I went to Xunhua County Town with a cousin to look for work. A Salar boss introduced us to work in a Salar village for fifteen RMB a day. My main task was shoveling sand full of gravel into a truck. I couldn't lift the shovel properly because I was scrawny. Lacking the strength to shovel efficiently, I put the shovel against my thighs, and after a while, red and painful deep marks appeared from the pressure. My fingers were calloused and swollen. I feared the Salar boss would say I did not work well, so I endured the pain every day.

Everyone worked hard, so I dared not rest. We lived in a temporary tent set up by the owner. Most meals were fried potatoes and vegetables, fried cabbage, and steamed buns. Even if there was no meat, I thought it was delicious.

I don't remember how long I stayed and how much money I made, but I remember giving all the money to my mother. I was happy to earn money for my family.

At seventeen, I went to Sog rdzong (Henan) Mongolian Autonomous County to collect caterpillar fungus with relatives of my family. Then I went to Them chen (Tianjun) County to work building houses. Chinese workers were contracted to build the houses. I assisted three of them in supplying mortar, cement, and bricks. The workers were experienced and did everything quickly and skillfully. I handed a bucket of mortar to a worker, and by the time I returned with bricks, the bucket was empty. The bricks were finished when I got some bricks after giving another bucket of mortar. I could quickly hand the bricks to the workers when they were next to me. When the nearby bricks were used up, I had to carry more from a distance, which was a time-consuming task.

Sometimes, the work was exhausting. Even though a single brick wasn't very heavy, repeatedly carrying and passing them all day drained me, but I had to keep going without a break. The hardest part was that I didn't speak Chinese at the time. During the day, I was sent to different places to work. I had to rely on gestures and repetition to understand the workers' orders. I quickly learned to recognize when they asked for mortar or other materials and memorized the names of items through constant use. Every time I listened to the workers, I was very nervous and careful, fearing that I would make a mistake and be scolded. It was hard to communicate when I didn't speak Chinese well. I was bored until I got off work.

The work was heavy, and I was exhausted every day. I especially missed my mother. I wasn't in the mood when others wore nice clothes and went shopping. I don't know why. I just wore my mother's clothes and missed her.

I was eighteen when I went to Brag dkar (Xinghai) County to dig for gold in a canyon. There were also Chinese workers in the canyon who were extracting stones. I heard the Chinese had worked there for over ten years without going home. They blew up the mountains and put rocks from the explosions into a big truck. I was responsible for picking up white stones with gold and carrying them to a big truck for the driver to transport. When we put gravel in water, we saw gold appear.

I went there to work with fellow villagers - five or six girls and two boys. The five girls slept on our mattresses in a white canvas tent while the two boys shared another tent with the Chinese workers. A day's pay was thirty RMB. The conditions were harsh. We ate plain noodles every day. It was very cold at night in the ninth lunar month. Still, I was happy at that time. The girls had endless conversations every day. The boys would chat with us and tell ghost stories to scare us. Some girls and boys flirted.

Limited water and no toilets were difficulties. The boss brought drinking water from outside in buckets. We rarely had enough water to wash our clothes and hair. The boss was very strict and didn't allow us to leave the tent freely when we weren't working. We couldn't leave the work site for almost two months. Everyone went to a ravine to go to the toilet. This made the girls uncomfortable when we encountered men going to the toilet. Going to the toilet was troublesome for me.

I heard some Chinese workers were killed in cave explosions, while others were crushed by falling rocks. We did odd jobs. Some of us were only eighteen. Many Tibetans were working there at the time; otherwise, the Chinese workers might have bullied us. After working for two months, we went home. On the way back, several girls bought fashionable suits of clothes, and we felt very beautiful.

I married my current husband when I was twenty-six. He and I met through friends. After getting to know each other for a while, he called me on my landline one day and asked me to meet him. I stayed with him. When my family learned this, they were very angry. My parents didn't approve of me marrying him. They thought I had disobeyed them and humiliated them by sneaking off.

I don't regret what I did because my family arranged my marriage to my ex-husband, whom I didn't even know at the time. My eldest brother was the one who forced me to marry. He told me he would kick me out of the house if I refused to marry who they had chosen for me. I could only obey.

I was nineteen when I married my ex-husband, a businessman specializing in buying and selling caterpillar fungus.



He lived with his father. His mother had passed away when he was a child. Their family condition was good. I was pregnant a year later. I still wanted to earn money by collecting caterpillar fungus, so I decided to go collect, and my husband agreed. I worked as a hired laborer with my relatives to collect caterpillar fungus in Rma stod (Maduo) County, Mgo log Prefecture, and earned 6,000 RMB a month.

I was skinny, so the boss who hired me didn't realize I was pregnant. However, I'm one of those who isn't very good at collecting caterpillar fungus. I was frustrated and ashamed when others collected more caterpillar fungus than me. The mountains in that area are very high. Others climbed those mountains daily to collect caterpillar fungus. At first, I could keep up with them, but later, I realized I didn't have enough strength. Those who didn't know I was pregnant laughed at me and called me lazy. After finishing work, everyone returned to their tents, where we socialized and enjoyed each other's company. The boss rewarded the most efficient collectors. We sang, danced, and ate snacks together.

My belly was hard as a rock for several nights and was so painful I couldn't move or eat. All I wanted was to lie down and sleep. Luckily, some relatives knew I was pregnant and took care of me. I lasted a month and then went home. I gave all the money I had earned to my husband. I helped my father-in-law harvest the crops and gave birth to a daughter in winter.

My husband often didn't come home. I don't know what I did wrong. Maybe he changed. The next year, he became increasingly cold. Our relationship worsened. One day, I angrily returned to my natal home and we officially separated two years later. Since then, we have each lived our own lives. My family members encouraged us to reconcile, but I learned my ex-husband was not willing to reconcile. I was extremely disappointed in him.

His family took care of my daughter after we divorced. I thought about my daughter every day and vividly dreamed of her. My family noticed this. I stayed home and did nothing while constantly worrying about my child. They then persuaded me to go outside the village to work to take my mind off things. I thought it

might help me see things more openly, so I went to work building a bridge in Chu dmar leb (Qumalai) County, Yul shul (Yushu) Prefecture with my cousin. That job eased some of my pain. Gradually, I rarely thought about my daughter because I was busy working every day.

My cousin and I went with some men from the village. We were paid one hundred RMB a day. At first, the Salar boss arranged for my cousin and me to cook for fifteen workers. Although cooking is not that difficult, I didn't want to do it. A woman from our village really wanted to cook, but the boss wouldn't let her. After my cousin and I worked as cooks for a month, it was time for the Salar's fast, and the Salar boss wouldn't let the two of us cook because they had to get up at four a.m. to eat. So, he got a couple of Salar women to do the cooking.

That Salar boss was particularly good. He urged us to eat more every day and to rest at noon. He was concerned about our well-being and mentioned that our family would worry if we became thin. We switched jobs from cooks to laborers. We followed the workers daily, assisting them in carrying items and handing them bricks and cement. I came home after two months in Chu dmar leb County. My family members said my physical and mental states had improved. As long as I was in a good mood, it didn't matter how much work I did, but if my heart was in pain, it was painful to do easy work. Shortly after I came home, my ex-husband's family told our family, "You can have your daughter if you want to raise her. If you don't, we'll give her to someone else to raise."

I was angry when I heard this! Why would they give their child to someone else to raise? If they didn't want to raise her, why did they take her away from me in the first place? I would raise my own child even if I were poor. I would rather raise her than someone else, so I took my daughter.

After living in my natal home for less than two years, I lived with my present husband, a former monk who was five years my senior. I followed him to work every year. One of my eyes had a sarcoma, and my husband wasn't much of a collector of caterpillar fungus. We didn't collect caterpillar fungus. He was very kind to me

when we first met. When he learned I had a daughter in my natal home, he arranged to bring her to our home to raise.

I felt he was not treating me well after I gave birth to two more daughters. I know girls can't compete with boys no matter how hard they try, especially when it comes to important things, because girls are useless. For instance, in case one of her parents passes away, daughters might appear fragile and show their grief by crying, while boys might endure the pain silently. Especially when a corpse needs to be cremated, a man carries it to the cremation place. Women lack the courage to do it.

My husband and his family didn't force me to have a son. They thought that it was their fate. In a dream, I was walking in a forest. After I saw a particularly straight tree in the distance, I ran to it and found that it was crooked. So, I switched to a different tree, but it was also crooked. I couldn't find a straight tree as I ran around. I gave birth to a daughter the next day.

When I started working with my husband in Yul shul County, he was very nice, and I didn't have to worry about anything. He bought my tickets, carried my luggage, and purchased various delicious snacks for me. We were there with three couples from the same village. It was just a year after the earthquake.<sup>1</sup> The main street in Yul shul County was full of houses that had begun to be rebuilt. Our job was to rebuild Skye dgu mdo (Jiegu) Monastery. The daily wage was 130 RMB for my husband and one hundred RMB for me. I was responsible for shoveling dirt into a handcart and transporting it back and forth every day.

Everyone slept together in a single disaster relief tent, as this job was part of a government project for post-disaster reconstruction. We ate and drank well every day, with meat at every meal. At that time, the boss and most workers were Chinese, so we needed to communicate in Chinese daily. My Chinese wasn't good. Whenever the boss assigned me work, I nodded and said, "Okay," and did the work diligently and conscientiously so he would like me.

---

<sup>1</sup> On 14 April 2010, six earthquakes struck Yul shul County with a maximum magnitude of 7.1 at 7:49 a.m.

My husband's Chinese is not good, but he has a lot of confidence and would argue with the boss. There were several days when I wanted to leave work at seven p.m., but the boss would suddenly assign me more tasks. I didn't dare refuse and ended up working until after ten p.m. When my husband found out, he scolded me for being stupid. He ran to the boss and asked why a woman had been sent to work overtime without being paid. The boss was also angry and felt my husband was provoking him. Luckily, some workers talked them down that day, or they would have fought for sure. After this incident, I felt that the boss didn't like us and looked at us coldly. We worked for two months and went home.

My husband changed after I had given birth to our two daughters. Once, when we went out to work together, I was dizzy and vomited because of the bus. I was feeble. My husband was very impatient and ignored me. We were ready to carry our luggage when we reached the Zi ling bus station. Loaded with mats and quilts, we looked for a hotel. I thought my husband would help me carry what we had, but he randomly picked up a light bag and left, not waiting for me or helping me carry the heavier bags. I was afraid of losing him, so I tried my best to follow him, but he walked faster and faster.

I was soon too tired to keep up with him and sadly wondered, "Why doesn't he care about me?"

Thinking about this, I angrily put my luggage on the side of the road, squatted in the middle of a crowd, and wept. I really thought I'd lost my husband. I didn't know what to do. As I was sitting there in great despair, my idiot husband returned and asked, "What's wrong with you? Are you not feeling well?"

I replied, "Didn't you see me vomiting on the bus? I'm the one carrying the quilt. Why don't you carry it?"

He said nothing and helped me carry the bags. We looked for a hotel and stayed in one near the bus station for one night. When we left the next day, I had to carry luggage on my back with great difficulty. A waitress looked at my husband and said, "This is your wife, and you are not carrying this stuff. Aren't you ashamed!"

When my husband heard this and saw Chinese women looking at him, he was embarrassed and helped me carry the bags.

Worse, he began to beat and scold me. Several times we quarreled over something during work. When he was outraged, he would take me to a place where no one could see and beat me. My heart was very painful, and I did not want to stay with him, but thinking of my three daughters, I could only bear it.

One of my most painful job experiences was when I was three or four months pregnant with my youngest daughter. My husband took me to a town neighboring Chen gangs rgyal (Kekexili) in Yushu Prefecture. I forgot the exact location. The work was easy, involving filling road potholes and cracks, and placing rocks and dirt in pits and crevices.

That place is at an elevation of 4,000 to 5,000 meters. We slept in makeshift tents and couldn't sleep well at night because it was so cold. I felt I was running out of oxygen, and sometimes I couldn't catch my breath. Four or five Chinese workers occasionally came but only stayed for one or two days. They couldn't bear the high altitude. My husband and I stayed because the boss paid us each 150 RMB a day. After working there for half a month, my health started deteriorating. I wanted to vomit and had acid reflux every time I ate. Periodically, I vomited yellow fluid. My mouth was bitter and astringent, and I couldn't eat, but I still had to work every day like a normal worker. My boss and fellow workers didn't know I was pregnant. A female worker asked, "Are you feeling unwell? Perhaps you should go to the hospital."

It was so challenging that I wanted to cry. However, I didn't dare to say I was pregnant. My husband and I were afraid my boss would fire me. Luckily, when I was working, my boss didn't supervise me all the time, so I had some time and opportunity to rest. My husband and I stayed there for two months and then went home. When I gave birth to my daughter, the doctor told me that my daughter's heart hadn't grown properly and she might have heart problems in the future.

My youngest daughter was particularly prone to illness after she was born. My husband and I took her to the hospital many times and bought a lot of medicine. We didn't have enough money, so we didn't think of an operation. We thought she wouldn't have serious

problems. It wasn't until she was five years old and attending a village kindergarten that the doctor said she had a congenital heart disease. This was when the government sent doctors to village kindergartens for medical checkups. The teacher phoned my husband and convinced us to let our daughter have free heart surgery. We agreed. It was when my husband and I worked in Them chen (Tianjun) County. The job was to plant grass in the desert. Each of them was paid one hundred RMB a day. We had been working for two months when we got the call. We both then rushed home. The surgery was successful.

Whenever I earned money, I gave it to my husband. I didn't know how much money we both had. I just asked him for a little bit when I needed money. My husband doesn't give me details about money. If we run out of money, he finds a way to borrow some, and I don't have to worry about it. I was responsible for household chores, serving my in-laws, caring for the children, and performing farm work. I feel ignorant sometimes, living a life without knowing anything and doing nothing but working every day. My husband thinks I have no burdens and says, "If you want to be the head of the family, you take care of the money in the future."

When he said that, I wimped out again because I was timid and worried about not having enough money. I can't afford to buy clothes for myself, let alone makeup.

Recently, my husband and I spent 150,000 RMB to purchase thirty cow-yak crosses with a loan from the township government and with our savings. Before this, my husband and I left our three children in the care of my parents-in-law, but they are now eighty, and it was an added burden for them.

As a result, my husband and I separated from my in-laws' home and now live in a newly built one-room house, leaving my parents-in-law in the care of my husband's brother. We lived independently, looking after our three children and herding cattle.

In winter and spring, I only have to drive the cows up a hill every day and let them go where they please. I then drive them home before sunset, water them, and feed them grass. In summer and fall, when everyone started planting crops, I needed to herd the

cows daily on the mountains during the day to prevent them from going into others' wheat fields.

Compared to women who live with their in-laws, I've been happy with my life after separating from them. I was judged on everything I did when I lived with my in-laws. For example, every time I scooped up noodles, I was afraid that my mother-in-law would say that I had put little meat in her bowl and had put much in my bowl. If I wore a lovely dress, my mother-in-law would say, "You are a mother of three. You can't dress like this."

I washed my panties in the cowshed. I was too shy to let my in-laws see them. My mother-in-law objected to me going shopping with village women. She believed a daughter-in-law should focus on home chores. My husband and I worked outside the home for two or three months a year before we returned home to help harvest the crops. If we didn't, they got angry. I had to consider all of this carefully.

In the past two years, agricultural labor has become more mechanized. Women traditionally handled plowing, fertilizing, and harvesting, while men did less fieldwork. Since most women don't know how to operate the machines, men must take on more responsibilities. My husband now does more agricultural work, which has lessened my fieldwork. His family didn't provide us with financial assistance. We earned everything with our sweat.

I am relieved I don't have to live with my in-laws. Now, I can eat, work, and take breaks whenever I please. If we go out for a hot pot or a good meal, I forget all the pain and feel happy again. If you keep pain in your heart and can't let it go, you can't live.

#### ACCOUNT Four: Bde skyid (b. 1970)

I mainly worked at home doing housework, farm work, and caring for my in-laws and three children until I was thirty. Only a few men at that time went outside the village to work. Most women stayed at home. I collected cow-yak cross dung and twigs every day after breakfast, which were the most important things for us in our daily

lives. Especially in winter, my daily task as a daughter-in-law was to go to the forest and cut wood.

The snow was knee-deep, and my shoes and clothes were covered with snow as I climbed the mountains. As I was just about to climb a tree one day to break off a few branches, I saw the forest keeper coming up a hill in the distance. I was so scared that I left my mule and fled. The forest guard saw me running and shouted, "If you run, I'll find you and cripple your legs!"

He took his rifle and pointed it at me. I said in terror, "Please, don't shoot me! I'm not going to run away," while running down the hill as fast as I could.

Fortunately, the forest guard didn't catch me that day or I'd have been punished. Once I felt the forest keeper was not behind me, I let out a breath. I realized I had been so nervous when I ran that my legs were numb.

Sometimes after supper, I would go to the forest, cut down a tree, and sneak back to the house with the trunk on my back. Some trunks were used to build our house, while others were sold to Salar. My husband and I even stole trees on New Year's Eve night because there were no forest guards, so we weren't afraid of being caught. We had to pay a fine if we were caught, and the wood would be confiscated.

My mother-in-law complained she was cold when she was sick and in bed, so I had to collect branches even though I was pregnant with my almost-born daughter.

Early one morning, I rode a mule into the mountains to collect branches. I tied them into three bundles, loaded them onto the mule, and carried each bundle home separately. I had a large belly because I was pregnant and had to struggle to lift the bundles onto the mule's back. Lacking strength, I was unable to tie the branches tightly to the mule's back, so the branches kept falling off along the way.

I fell after I put the branches on the mule's back on the third trip home. I was very afraid that my unborn baby had died. My belly became hard, and she didn't move. It was dark when I got home.



I gave birth to my daughter three days later. Fortunately, she was okay. Fifteen days later, I was collecting twigs and cattle-yak dung again.

Women do most of the farm work, and men help sometimes. Women cut the wheat. Men carry the sheaves to the house. If a man comes to cut the wheat, villagers tease him. Our family's crop had six people's share. We continued to cut at night if we couldn't finish cutting during the day. My husband used to accompany me in the evenings to see if the field keepers had come to check our work. The field keepers only allowed us to harvest wheat when it was ripe. If our family were the only one who had not finished cutting wheat, the other families would let their cattle loose. Fearing they might eat our crops, I came at night with a head lamp, cut as much as possible until it was almost dawn and then I went home.

When putting wheat on a donkey, my hands were calloused and blistered. One night, my husband fell asleep while on watch. The field guard then found me and fined me twenty kilograms of wheat.

I was busy every day and still had to cook. Even if you worked very hard, your mother-in-law and husband might have treated you poorly.

It's much better now. With money you can buy cow dung, coal, and electricity. Moreover, women now have freedom to choose their partners, unlike when matchmaking was the norm. I got married at twenty-three in an arranged marriage that was considered late. This was because I needed to assist my parents with their work. Boys were left to study or became monks. Many girls could not marry. Some villagers teased that there were as many unmarried girls as cows.

It wasn't until after my oldest daughter married and my remaining two children went to the boarding high school in Bis mdo Town that I followed my husband to work in my late thirties. We first went to Mdo la (Qilian) County in Mtsho byang (Haibei) Prefecture. Our workplace was near Mtsho sngon po (Qinghaihu, Qinghai Lake), where the temperature was low in the mornings and evenings. My husband was involved in road construction - mixing cement with

water, lifting sand with a shovel, and sifting sand. I worked as a cook. Each of us received thirty RMB a day. The Salar boss supervised seven groups. Each group had thirty workers, including Tibetans, Han, and Salar.

Three female cooks were responsible for preparing meals for thirty people each day. We had to wake up at six a.m. to start an electricity generator we used to make bread buns, stir-fry vegetables, and boil water. After preparing breakfast, I cut and cooked vegetables for lunch. Noodles were made for dinner, and buns for the next morning.

Sometimes, we were so busy we had no time to eat. With no electricity at night, I had to boil water over a wood fire for the workers. The boss frequently told us to use less oil to save money when preparing food. However, the workers considered the food flavorless and insisted we add more oil, which made preparing food challenging.

Since all of us workers were recruited by a *nashi* 'middleman who finds workers' before working under the bosses, the bosses didn't know much about us. Several female workers were pregnant, including one from Bis mdo Town. One day, she was carrying bags of cement, suddenly felt weak, and gave birth. She had been working while pregnant for over a month. The premature infant died within a few days. Her husband buried it.

When the boss found out, he allowed her to rest for seven days but didn't take her to the hospital. To prevent this from happening again, the boss fired the few remaining pregnant women. After this incident, I asked the woman, "Have you recovered? Can you still work?"

She replied, "I'm fine, I can still work."

We worked together for three months and went home in the eleventh lunar month.

My most difficult time was working in Mdzo rgan ra bar (Huashixia) Town, Rma stod (Maduo) County, Mgo log Prefecture. After harvest, my mother's family introduced my husband and me to a Sichuan boss who went there to build herders' houses. I was an assistant laborer serving four workers with a salary of eighty RMB a

day. My job involved mixing concrete and handing the workers bricks. It sounds easy, but it's not when you do it. I had to make twenty trips carrying fifty-kilogram cement bags and at least thirty trips carrying mixed cement, mortar, and other materials. My hands were covered with blisters and calluses. Workers were paid by the number of bricks they laid, so they worked fast. Laying a brick took five seconds, and the workers placed 3,000 to 4,000 bricks daily. I couldn't keep up with their pace, so they yelled at me. I couldn't understand their Chinese very well when they scolded me loudly. One worker scolded, "*Mum mu*," 'cow' because I didn't understand Chinese.

The worker was once late for work. Then the boss asked why he was late. He said, "Because the assistant didn't want to work. She was late."

I said, "He's lying. He didn't come on time. I came earlier."

The boss believed me and scolded the worker. Consequently, that worker bullied me by arranging for me to do a lot of work. He threw stones and sand at me when I didn't listen to him. I was so angry that I scolded him in Tibetan and threw stones and sand back at him. He couldn't understand what I was saying and laughed at me.

After completing one herder's house, we moved to the next one. We had to demolish an old house and move the damaged bricks. I'm always afraid of being struck by bricks while demolishing a house. We lived in tents most of the time. There was no running water or cooking, so we brought water from a river.

Additionally, we stayed far from town. It wasn't easy to buy food, so we asked local herders to give us bread. Some workers secretly stole bread from them.

The daily work was tiring. A female worker worked so hard that her nose ran. She didn't have time to clean it. Snot flowed until it reached her mouth. Everyone laughed at her. Another time, a few of us women went to demolish a house, and dust scattered everywhere. I could not see where my companions were for a moment. I looked into the dust and asked, "Where are you?"

My companions laughed and replied, "Right next to you."

Can't you see us?"

We laughed for a long time.

One night the boss and some of his workers fought with locals when they went to town for drinks and dinner. Local herders angrily came to our construction site the next day, saying, "Prepare your weapons. We'll prepare ours. Let's see who wins the fight!"

All the men on the construction site took shovels and sticks and went to fight. We women didn't dare go and talked them out of it, fearing that they would kill someone in the fight. We called the local Public Security Bureau, and police came to stop them.

We finished building a house in about ten days, packed up our bedding, and moved to the next herder's house. The herdsmen were scattered, so we suffered a lot carrying our luggage and building tools to the next house. Some slopes were too steep for a tractor or a truck to cross, so we had to carry our belongings up the slope.

It was still winter. We couldn't build a fire in our makeshift tent at night, so we just put a mat on the cold grass and slept that way. The following day, we woke up to find our tent and covers covered with melting frost.

Sometimes, we were chased by packs of wild dogs. We were also informed that a brown bear had recently attacked a family, which made it difficult for us to sleep at night because we were afraid bears might attack.

Each winter day felt especially cold. Working hard made my body warm, and I was determined to be productive. When I saw male workers slacking off and not working while the boss was away, I scolded, "We women are working hard, but you men just pretend to work when the boss is around. Aren't you ashamed? You've come here to work, and the boss has paid you. Please have a conscience."

The male workers scolded me for being nosy. After three months, my husband and I earned more than 7,000 RMB each and went home happily.

The furthest I've been from my home is Bsang chu (Xiahe) County, Gannan Tibetan Prefecture, where my husband and I worked constructing a river embankment for two months. We were

paid one hundred RMB a day each. As an assistant, I carried and handed workers rocks, concrete, and sand. When a driver delivered a truckload of stones, assistant workers loaded them onto tricycle carts, transported them to the worksite, and neatly placed them on the ground. The workers then used the stones to build the embankment. It was summer and rainy. We had to work in the rain, fearing the river would rise and flood. We wore raincoats and rain shoes that the boss bought. We desperately built a pile of rocks by the river; fearing being washed away.

Some construction project leaders watched from inside a car. They said we should take a break from the rain, but we dared not without the boss's order. Without a loader to load and transport the rocks, carrying rocks ourselves was slow and dangerous. Once, I was carrying a rock. It fell and hit my foot. I was off work for a couple of days. We stayed in makeshift tents where men and women slept crammed together. Some people snored and farted when we were in bed at night, making me very uncomfortable.

After two months of work, my husband and I, and seven or eight Chinese workers, planned to quit and go home to harvest, but we couldn't find the boss at the construction site. He didn't answer his phone when we called him. We had no choice but to wait for about ten days without working. We hadn't signed a contract. Work was based on verbal agreement. We had little money to buy food, so we ate moldy steamed buns and rice every day to survive. I was concerned my husband and I wouldn't have enough money to buy a ticket home. Ultimately, the Chinese workers reported the boss to the local government, which helped us get our wages. Otherwise, we would have worked for nothing.

My husband and I struggled to find work opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. We had to scan our itinerary codes and register our health codes in Chinese using our phones whenever we went out. Neither of us had gone to school beyond the elementary level, so it was challenging to operate more complex setups. As a result, we couldn't look for work far from home and settled for nearby jobs.

A Salar boss came to our village the year after the outbreak

and recruited ten women and fifty other villagers. All were women in their fifties. There were no men. The Salar boss told us the job was to grow vegetables and plant the fields. I was worried my husband wouldn't be able to find a job, so I begged the Salar boss to arrange a job for him. Thankfully, he was very nice and arranged for my husband to help his family with goats. The boss's home was in a Salar village next to the highway in Dp'a lung (Hualong) Hui Autonomous County. He had undertaken a government vegetable planting project. Half of the village land and related water resources were his. Villagers who needed to use water resources in the area had to obtain the Salar boss's consent.

My husband herded goats for the boss's family. My husband and I stayed in a house near the boss's home while the other women were transported back and forth by the Salar boss in a truck every day. My job was to plant corn and yams in the fields, construct plastic greenhouses over the crops, and fertilize, water, and spray pesticides on the crops. The boss's wife was kind and asked me to eat at their house every morning. While we women were working, she brought us food and drink. The owner often recruited Tibetan workers. The family spoke Tibetan, which we spoke in daily communication.

The most challenging aspect of working there was the weather. It was hot and dry in the fifth and sixth lunar months. Every day, we worked bent over and covered in sweat. The heat made us uncomfortable. The boss's wife was there to supervise us, so it was hard to have an opportunity to slack off. There were no trees, leaving us with no shade. The nearest shady places were far away by a river. We worked from seven to seven or eight in the evening. We did have a lunch break. We were constantly pushed to work and weren't allowed to chat or talk during work. We were warned not to take too long to go to the toilet. We were exhausted at the end of a day's work.

My husband herded goats for the Salar boss. There were 300 goats at first. After my husband herded them for three months, the Salar boss bought 500 more from a Tibetan herder, adding up to 800 goats. The boss said he'd give my husband and me 5,500

RMB a month each to keep herding goats for him, but we both thought this was too hard. There was no water available in the mountains. We needed to transport the goats to a distant river once in two days before bringing them back to the mountains. This was a challenging task. When my husband and I returned home, my husband got a call from the police station. A policeman asked, "Were you a goat herder? More than 200 goats disappeared. Did you have anything to do with this?"

My husband said, "We counted the goats before leaving. I don't know what happened."

Later, we learned rain and flooding washed over 200 goats into a nearby reservoir. The Salar boss thought the goats had been stolen and suspected my husband. We didn't stay there to avoid my husband getting into trouble.

After more than three months of work for the Salar boss, I was paid 130 RMB and my husband 150 RMB a day, which added up to 25,000 RMB. Our new house had cracks in the walls, so we used the money to repair the damage and improve the house's condition. My husband's brothers divided the family's fields after the deaths of my parents-in-law. We received a small field of three *mu*.

We put herbicides on our crops, so there is little grass to remove. After irrigation, nothing is particularly labor-intensive. We need to farm and don't dare let the fields lie fallow because the government confiscates such land. When my husband and I went out to work, I asked my husband's sister to help farm.

My son and daughter have also started to go out to work. My son worked in an electronics factory in Shanghai for a year after he graduated from vocational school. My daughter also graduated from vocational school last year. She didn't get a job, so she followed her brother to the Shanghai factory. My son went with fifteen young men from our town. They found an agent. If they were paid 160 RMB a day for their work, the agent took forty RMB. But this time, they didn't have to pay the agent when they got there.

These young people were all around twenty-five. They don't want to do farm work at home and can't get a government job when

they take an exam, so factory work suits them. If I could speak Chinese, I would like to go there too. My daughter has called me these days and said the factory work was hard. She needs to stand and twist screws in the machines every day. The weather is hot, and she's not accustomed to eating rice. If they stay for two or three years, they can become a team leader and get paid more.

Since we can make money, our family is living a much better life. Before, we ate bread with spices at noon and sugar only during the New Year period. We can now buy various vegetables and fruits at any time. I fill school bags with bread every day when I send my children to primary school. When plastic bags are unavailable, I instruct them to bring them back, or there won't even be enough plastic bags at home. Now, there are so many, I don't even know where to put them.

My hands and feet now have problems after working for many years. I helped a monk relative build a house at Bla brang Monastery in Xiahe County. I washed my hands and feet in the local river. My hands and feet have been sore since then. It's because of the water deities. My son and daughter have persuaded me to rest at home, but I'm not used to staying at home and doing nothing. All the village women think it's better to go out and earn money than stay home. If you stay home, villagers ask, "Why are you staying home when you are so healthy? Why don't you go out and work?"

In our community, you leave and look for work even if you're fifty or sixty and your hair is gray. People outside say, "Old Auntie, don't you have any children? Why are you still working when you are old?"

They don't understand why we want to work. We're used to working. In our community, we look for work even if we're fifty. This is the life of women around here. We worked for the family when we were children, worked for our husbands' families when we were young, and went out to work when we were middle-aged. We were born to work. The township authorities have been actively seeking street sweepers for the past two days. I'm willing to go. Some villagers say it's embarrassing, but as long as I can earn money,



there's nothing to be ashamed of, and the job is very easy, just sweeping and taking garbage from the streets.

Speaking of here, women in herding areas have grassy hills, yaks, sheep, and caterpillar fungus. Most of them don't go to work. We used to have yaks and sheep. When we returned from collecting caterpillar fungus, we stayed home to look after the livestock. My in-laws were a bit younger and could help at home, but once they were old, they couldn't care for them, so we had to sell all the livestock.

Salar women are quite relaxed, running restaurants or selling clothes, and dressing up daily, unlike us, who are grey and grimy. When we work, Salar men said, "Others will laugh at wives of our Salar men if they do heavy and dirty work outside. Tibetan women are pitiful, doing dirty, heavy work."

That makes sense. We suffer so much because those male migrant laborers are not capable of making money. I chatted with farmer women in Gcan tsha (Jianzha) and Dp'a lung counties. They were just like us and worked outside their homes. Those with little land only went home during the New Year. Few women work in restaurants. Most villagers say that it's only a place for young women. If you work with a shovel, you get paid more and get home whenever you need to go, so we chose this job. The village atmosphere has been bad for a few years now. Everyone competes. I want to earn more than you. If your family built a new house, I want to build one. Everyone is very busy making money.

My husband and I collected caterpillar fungus when we were young. Once a year in the fourth lunar month, my husband and I carried twenty-five kilograms of bags of flour on our backs, along with mats and quilts, and slept on the grasslands, facing the stars in fear wild dogs would attack us. Sometimes we couldn't find a car and climbed mountains with our heavy luggage. After paying the land fee with the money saved from hard work, we went home with caterpillar fungus. It was difficult to sell the caterpillar fungus for a good price.

We have to go out to work to earn money and work for one or two months. I look for a boss to work in the sixth and seventh

lunar months after harvesting our wheat, plowing, drying the wheat grain in the sun, and sacking it. Whenever I go to a new place, I am nervous about getting up early, what I will do, who I will go with, who I will be around, how much I will be paid, and the food. It took about five days to get used to it. Then it was time to move and hand bricks, make concrete, and operate mixers. We worked until winter, when pigs were slaughtered. If there was no other place to work, we went home. After the pigs were slaughtered, cooked, and eaten between the tenth and the fifteenth of the tenth lunar month, we started preparing for the New Year by working on religious activities in the village.

I was a daughter-in-law who faced parents-in-law every day, cared for children, did endless farm and housework, and dealt with my in-laws' bad treatment and my husband's beating. Divorce is shameful. For the sake of your natal family's reputation and your children, you can't divorce. When I was younger, my husband beat me at home, and once when I was working outside because I was talking with men at the construction site. My husband was jealous and beat me. Fortunately, some people persuaded him to stop. Now that I'm older and without my in-laws, I've made my husband's home my own, so I must worry about everything in this house.

#### ACCOUNT Five: Me tog (b. 1969)

I don't know what I did in my last life, but I was destined to be miserable after I married. I'm here to redeem myself in this life. I've never done anything bad to anyone. Even if I can't help them, I've never harmed them. I was an only daughter. My parents arranged for me to marry a man from another village when I was nineteen. I had three girls in a row. I had to have a fourth to have a son. The birth control policy was very strict at that time. Government people came to my house every day to force me to have a birth control ring to prevent me from having another child. My family gave my third daughter to a relative in a neighboring village so that I could have a fourth child. She lives with that relative and doesn't come to my home.

When I gave birth to my son and thought I could live happily, my husband was diagnosed with Hepatitis B. Our family spent a lot of money on his treatment. I can't imagine how I would have survived without my parents' help. My parents are farmers. Their only income is from farming. They help me care for my husband and children. I go out alone every year to work.

I collect caterpillar fungus to earn a lot of money quickly. Every spring, I first planted crops at home. After weeding a few times, I carried sheets and food on my back and followed my relatives from neighboring villages to collect caterpillar fungus. The landowner will allow you to collect if you pay rent for the land. Collecting until the caterpillar fungus harvesting season ends is up to you. Many women feel that collecting caterpillar fungus is very hard. I disagree. When the caterpillar fungus is newly exposed, it is fresh and small. If you look carefully, you will find it.

The year after I gave birth to my son, at the age of twenty-seven, I went to the Rgan gya (Ganjia) grasslands in Gannan Prefecture to collect caterpillar fungus. I followed my relatives from the neighboring village. I paid 300 RMB and collected for a month. I wasn't very experienced, so I didn't find many. One earned five RMB, and I collected about 1,500.

I didn't give up. I had to find more when I thought about raising three kids at home and taking care of my sick husband. The best year was when I went to Mgo log Prefecture with my oldest daughter in 2010. Only a herding couple and a man were on that mountain land that year. I paid 3,000 RMB for my daughter and my collection fee. We collected many. The herding couple kindly sent us to the bus station after a month on the day we were to leave. My daughter and I were on the evening bus. I was holding our caterpillar fungus bag. My daughter slept after we boarded the bus. I worried that the bag would be stolen and didn't dare sleep. When we arrived in Zi ling the next morning, we got off the bus and called my husband, who was consulting a doctor, to come and pick us up. I didn't breathe a sigh of relief until I saw my husband. Caterpillar fungus sold for twenty RMB per piece on average, and we made 40,000 RMB after we sold them all.

Whenever I see healthy husbands bringing their wives along to collect caterpillar fungus, I envy them. My husband suffered from a serious illness. The doctor said he would not be able to do heavy work and would have to be treated with injections, medication, and surgery to be completely cured. No matter how hard it is to collect caterpillar fungus, I go around every year borrowing money from my relatives and friends to get the money for the land payment to collect caterpillar fungus. I don't want my husband to die at a young age. I want my three children to have a father. I even took my oldest daughter in the third grade to collect with me.

My son understood how hard it was for me. He said he wanted to drop out and earn money to support our family when he was in junior high school. I knew my daughter had already dropped out of school due to the family situation. My son was very important, so I said, "I won't let you leave school. Even if I go out to beg for food, it's my responsibility to send you to school for an education."

In addition to collecting caterpillar fungus, I also collect *Gentiana macrophylla qinjiu* 'fiddlehead fern'. As a teenager, I carried a spade every fifth lunar month, climbed to the top of a high hill before dawn, and dug until dark. I feared that I would not dig much. I dared not take a break from digging as hard as possible. I didn't even have a drinking cup at the time. I endured thirst. *Qinjiu* is easy to dig. I collected twenty to fifty kilograms a day. I was covered in mud when I finished digging and carried it back home. I sold it for one RMB per kilogram. I could only earn twenty to fifty RMB a day. It's very physically demanding to dig.

I dug when I was pregnant and carried a sack of *qinjiu* down the mountain with my big belly. I also went with a few female friends to pastoral areas in Sog rdzong County, Rma chu County, and other places in 2013. We took buns and boiled water for the day. On average, I could dig thirty to forty kilograms. I was very satisfied when I earned 300-400 RMB per day, equivalent to ten RMB per kilogram.

When I was about thirty-five, it was popular to build new houses. My father and mother used their savings to build a new house. That was when I relied solely on collecting caterpillar fungus

to assist my family. I had to go out to work to help my parents build the house. Since all my childhood pals had married, the first time I went to cut oats in Mdzod dge (Ruo'er gai) County, Sichuan Province, I went with the new daughters-in-law of our village. A herder-owner assigned us to cut his family's oats in different places. One of my female companions and I stayed in a small building in the herder-owner's grassland.

One day, we finished cutting oats in the oats field and rested in our room at night. When we were in bed, we heard something ghostly, like a motorcycle on the roof, frightening us so much that we couldn't sleep. It was very loud. We wondered what the noise was. We thought it was the wind, but the noise seemed far away when we went out to look. When we got inside, it felt like it was on the roof. We both freaked out.

My companion took a stick, poked the ceiling a few times, and shouted, but this didn't help. The sound continued. We both stayed up that night chanting. We went to ask the owner why there was such a noise the next day. He said the sound was supposed to be a ghost. A twenty-year-old man near this building had died in a motorcycle accident. That motorcycle sound was him being a ghost. After hearing this story, we switched to another empty place to cut oats. There was only the sound of water when we went to fetch water during the day. We didn't see anyone. We persisted for two months and then went home with 5,000 RMB each.

I ask village neighbors or relatives in other villages to take me with them if they have work opportunities. Their kindness helps me. I have worked as an assistant laborer in Dar lag County, Mgo log Prefecture, picked wolfberries in Na gor mo County, and gone as far as Zhengzhou City.

When I was in Dar lag County, I worked with my oldest daughter and my son-in-law. I was the cook and assistant worker. Along the side of the highway, we built a concrete wall to prevent landslides. A board used to build the wall weighed thirty to thirty-five kilograms, and we needed to carry the boards from the truck to where the team leader told us to place them.

After unloading the boards, we put concrete on top of each

one and then added a layer of boards until there were about twenty layers. It was a hot summer. I constantly sweated when carrying boards. Each of us had to fulfill our individual assigned tasks every day. The job was the same for everyone, regardless of gender. When I stacked boards into ten layers, I couldn't reach or move them. Several times, a board fell and hit my fingertips. Luckily, the *nashi* was nice and said he would take me to the hospital. I didn't go because I thought I could bear it.

About ten women worked initially, but the work was so heavy that only two or three women stayed. The *nashi* realized women did not want to stay and that we didn't have enough cooks, so he told me to cook. In addition to my regular work hours, I also cooked during my breaks. I woke at six a.m. to prepare stir-fry and heat water for fifteen people. I returned to cook and wash the dishes at noon and prepared dinner at six p.m. I was busy and exhausted. Staying in a makeshift mobile room is not too cold, but when it freezes at night, it leaks during the day. It's a good thing the *nashi* paid me 150 RMB a day. I worked for fifty days and made 8,000 RMB.

I don't care if the work is heavy, as long as I can make a lot of money. I don't dare change bosses frequently. If I feel that a boss is short-tempered and scolding, or if I switch around because of bad food, people laugh and say, "This woman has changed many bosses. How demanding!"

I'm afraid of being described like that, so I usually persist.

I don't know how to read or write Chinese. When a boss asks me to do a job, I'll do it as if it were my own, without laziness or complaint. When I go out to work, the bosses have never told me they don't want me. They like and praise me for my good work and want me to continue to work for them.

A woman from my village and I went to Na gor mo City to pick goji berries. When a kilogram of goji berries brought 0.6 RMB, we could sell about 250 kilograms daily. After a month, I earned 10,000 RMB. The boss didn't tell you how much you needed to pick daily. Picking more or less depends on your ability. I wore my raggiest clothes every day and wrapped myself up tightly. Goji trees

are full of thorns. After a day of picking, my arms and back ached, and my clothes and fingers were covered with rotten goji berry juice. I had to stand in the sun all day. It was dirty and tiring. Many women, including Chinese and Hui, were picking goji berries. We had a good time during the break. The Chinese boss complimented us on our good work, and I even left my phone number so that we could come and continue to work in the future.

When I returned the following year, I noticed more women picking berries. With the increase in people, there was fierce competition to gather berries. The result was that I picked fewer berries than the year before, and my earnings were not as good as before.

My parents didn't think it was useful for girls to attend school, so I didn't. I couldn't recognize Chinese characters or Tibetan script or speak Chinese well, so I didn't dare look for a job in a big city for a long time. It wasn't until 2019 that people from the township government contacted those of us who had gone out to work and said that there were jobs in Zhengzhou City, Henan Province and that we would be fine even if we didn't know how to read Chinese because, as long as there were people from our place, some could recognize Chinese and translate for us. The work also included food and accommodation; the wage was 150 RMB daily.

After harvest, about fifteen of us went to work together in Zhengzhou City. A few knew Chinese, so I wasn't worried. When we arrived, a Chinese man came to pick us up and took us to the construction site in an underground cave far from the city. We were digging tunnels. Whenever I went into that dark underground cave, I felt that no enemy would find us if a war went on outside. We lived in dormitories arranged by the company and ate in the cafeteria. At seven a.m., we lined up for roll call and took a bus to the tunnels. Once inside, groups of ten followed a team leader to work.

Inside the tunnels, it was dimly lit. There were smelly sewer smells. We walked in the mud wearing raincoats and waders. My task was to shovel water, mud, and garbage from the tunnels into bags and take them to a place designated by the group leader, where a vehicle picked them up.

There were many workers. Some were responsible for water and electricity, and some did nothing because there was no supervision. The team leader told us when the breaks were. We didn't know the time, so he called the roll when it was time for a break. The leader feared we would get lost because the tunnels were dark and large.

Most workers were local Han. Some entire families worked there and stayed permanently. They were paid very well. Each made at least 10,000 RMB a month. The woman I worked with was from my village and knew more Chinese than I did. I could ask her anything I didn't understand. Sometimes, I was the only one left and didn't understand the team leader. He deliberately bullied me, ordering me to do all the work and calling me an idiot. Everyone had to shower after every day's work and meal, or our wages would be docked. A lot of garbage was in the toilets and bathhouses. The leader once deliberately arranged for me to clean the garbage in the toilets. I noticed the staff cleaning daily, and I wondered why I should clean. If I listened to him, it meant that he had fooled me, so I refused.

Though he was angry, I didn't care. I worked for two months and then returned home in the eleventh lunar month.

It would be endless if I talked about each of my work experiences. I've been slowly forgetting after all these years. For a laborer like me, even if I work very hard every time, as long as I earn money, I am satisfied that I can support and stay with my family. All those work pains are forgotten.

All the money I earned from collecting caterpillar fungus and work was spent on family expenses, such as buying medicine for my husband, paying for two children's schooling, helping my parents build a new house, and so on.

I couldn't afford to buy an expensive Tibetan robe, and if I had minor illnesses, I put up with them until the COVID-19 epidemic, when I was diagnosed with cervical cancer. My body completely fell apart. My periods were erratic. I thought I was getting older and might be experiencing menopause, so I ignored it.



I work hard even if I am on my period. Women around me do the same. No woman in our area takes a break from work because of her period. We think that's shameful and don't let others know. Gynecological exams in town are free every year. I didn't go because I was embarrassed and afraid the doctors would hurt me. It was not until I went to the hospital that I noticed my leukorrhea symptoms were different from those of other women.

I've been hospitalized for the past three years. My husband and children have been caring for me, especially my son, who hasn't had time to take exams and search for a job. I've had two surgeries. The expenses exceeded 300,000 RMB. Chemotherapy was 10,000 RMB each time. Luckily, I don't have to pay much myself. My health insurance reimburses me for a significant portion.

I thought I would die, so I didn't worry about money. I just wanted to be cured, but after surgery, expenses continued for medicines and injections. I couldn't earn money while my body was recovering, so I was a bit worried about money. When I was in the hospital, I thought I had worked very hard to make money, and that's why I was like this. Whenever I collected caterpillar fungus, I lay on the wet ground even if it was snowing and raining. Sometimes, if I couldn't find caterpillar fungus, I was anxious and depressed. Look at me now! I've lost weight and all my hair from chemotherapy. I need help standing and sitting, and sometimes I can't eat.

The whole village says no family has suffered more than ours. Though others have difficulty, none are sick. They are healthy and can still earn money. My husband and I are both ill and can't make money. To get a *dibao* allowance<sup>1</sup> from the government, I tearfully begged the village headman to explain our family situation. He reluctantly agreed because he had already chosen a few families with whom he had a good relationship. Ordinary people like me want a certificate of poverty from that government employee. They are willing to write a certificate after cigarettes or liquor are bought for

---

<sup>1</sup> *Dibao* households receive a minimum subsistence allowance from the government because they have no labor force due to severe disability or illness.

them.

As we waited for the government people to inspect my family's hospitalization certificate and ask me about my income and expenses, the village Party Secretary warned, "Be careful what you say, and don't cause trouble."

I'm helpless at times.

A female relative in another village is in my situation. That woman's husband was imprisoned for seven or eight years for wrongdoing. That woman works by herself to support the family. She could have divorced and left her husband's family with her kids, but she endured it so the children had a father. We went out to work together. I know her work experience. She has been to Mgo log Prefecture to collect caterpillar fungus, to a factory in Na gor mo City, and worked in Zi ling City.

When she worked in Zi ling, her bosses did not pay her, so she went to the Labor Bureau to sue them, eventually receiving 13,000 RMB. She used this money for a government loan to build a new house. When we worked together, we sometimes had a meal together. She didn't want to eat in a restaurant, said she didn't like restaurant food, and would rather eat instant noodles. I knew she wanted to save money.

When I was happy that she was moving to a new house this year, she fell off a ladder to the roof one morning. I visited her in the hospital when I heard about it. Fortunately, her spine was not completely broken. Her injured spine will heal with recuperation.

She told me the accident was because she worked outside all year, and her son was in school. No one in the family worshiped the mountain deity punctually every day, so she was punished. She is now in bed and needs six months of treatment. As an injured woman in a low-income family, she must seek help from others. Thankfully, her son received 100,000 RMB by going door-to-door to people all over the township and through online assistance. When her son said he needed to post her situation online for help, she replied, "I agree as long as you're not ashamed."

When she received those donations, she cried for a long time and then asked me to spend 10,000 RMB to light lamps for

blessings in the village *ma Ni khang* and the monastery. She said, "I don't know what bad things I did in my last life. I'm here to redeem myself in this life. I can't die. My husband and son have no one to care for them. The house has just been built and isn't finished. I can't die."

## CONCLUSION

Based on semi-structured interviews, the article describes the real-life experiences of five illiterate women in Gshong yul Tibetan Village who worked in agriculture and outside the home. The main labor was collecting caterpillar fungus and construction labor. In contrast to male workers, female workers are busy with home chores such as childrearing, caring for elders, cooking, farming, working with their husbands, and living their inferior socio-cultural status as daughters-in-law. Consequently, for these illiterate Tibetan women, migrant work is an economic activity and a temporary freedom from their usual identity.

The rise of the market economy, the influence of family patriarchy, and the division of gender roles in traditional society have created the low social status of women in villages for a long time. Women must obey their parents, husbands, and in-laws in significant family matters. For example, their marriages were arranged by their parents. The primary reason women work outside the home is to earn money for their families. For young women, working outside is a way to escape their in-laws and temporarily gain personal freedom. For example, in the case of Mtsho mo (b. 1988), she must serve a large family daily and lacks the freedom to wear make-up and clothes she likes. Working outside gives her the freedom to be herself for a short time. She can rest, sleep, go shopping, wear what she wants, and make-up when she is off work and is not judged by her in-laws and villagers. Some women find value in their work. For example, Me tog said that when she could support her family on her own without the help of a man. She embodied the value she created by earning money through work.

The geographical mobility of Tibetan female migrant workers in Gshong yul Village shows the impact and limitations of their geographical and ethnic identities. They lack policy guidance from the State and formal professional intermediary organizations. They access a spontaneous, informal organization based on family connections and geographic identity, providing mutual help and transferring information among members within the village. Female villagers often follow their husbands, relatives, or family members first, and then their familiar female companions, seeking a sense of security and belonging. These women have no schooling. The consequence was a very limited ability in the Chinese language, leading to work challenges. They can only speak Amdo Tibetan and a rudimentary Qinghai Chinese. For this reason, they are more inclined towards employment in Tibetan towns and cities with large Tibetan populations, where they can adapt. Although a few women have gone to work in cities farther away, the differences in culture, climate, and forms of work have made it difficult. They had no intention of working there again. Women's submissiveness led to the choice of industries concentrated in labor-intensive fields with a strong labor force, low skill requirements, and low income. They mainly concentrate on simple manual labor, such as collecting caterpillar fungus, *Gentiana*, and ferns, as well as serving as assistant workers on construction sites. Male workers' wages were generally higher than those of female workers, partly due to greater physical strength.

Based on the life narratives of five Tibetan women in Gshong yul Village and their labor experiences, these women face marginalization in both their families and work environments. Village culture requires that a daughter-in-law live with her husband's family and serve the elders, children, and her husband; undertake agricultural work and household chores; and earn income by working, even if the money she earns must be given to male family elders or her husband.

These five female workers lacked adequate protection for their labor rights and benefits in the labor market, including the

absence of labor contracts, working while pregnant, and unpaid wages. Discrimination by their employers was based on their gender and physical strength. They lived in crowded, makeshift dormitories or substandard tents, were assigned intense labor, received a monotonous diet, often breathed in cement dust and dirt detrimental to their health, and had limited proficiency in the Chinese language, leading to work challenges. Two female workers mentioned they were abused by their jealous husbands, stemming from interaction with other males during work.

Working outside their home community was vital for these five female workers to support their families financially, despite the challenging work environment. Zi ling's year-round employment allowed Lha mo (b. 1994) to earn almost 60,000 RMB, significantly improving her family's living conditions. With this income, they purchased meat and various vegetables, built a new house, and bought a car. Working outside their community was a crucial economic activity for these Tibetan women.

The five consultants were from a generation before enforced school attendance. Their families saw no need for them to attend school. Instead, marriage and having children were considered important. Compared to educated young Tibetan women with more life choices, the thoughts and behaviors of these five women were restricted by their families' and communities' struggles to fulfill their aspirations. Once married, they lived with their husbands' families and spent their time and energy on matters concerning the family. Migrant work allowed them to learn from the outside world and gain temporary freedom from their husbands' homes while demonstrating their ability to earn money.

The status of local Tibetan female workers was inferior to that of males in their families and the workplace. They were expected to care for family members and perform all household chores as daughters-in-law. The five reports provide detailed and descriptive accounts that encompass key themes, including marriage, discrimination, prejudice, and workplace living

conditions. Their narratives reveal pronounced emotional ambivalence. Their experiences as migrant workers as they reflect on their struggle for autonomy through economic participation are marked by fear, hardship, and despair. This tension reflects the complex adaptation strategies of illiterate Tibetan women in the process of modernization.

Exploring the life stories and labor migration process of five Tibetan female workers in Gshong yul Community sheds light on A mdo Tibetan women in the workforce. This study contends that Tibetan female workers' motivations, experiences, and encountered challenges are closely tied to her gender roles and family background. This contributes to our understanding of Tibetan female workers and has broad implications for gender studies, labor migration studies, and predicaments faced by A mdo Tibetan women today.

## REFERENCES

- Childs, Geoff. 2008. Tibetan Transitions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Fertility, Family Planning, and Demographic Change. *Brill's Tibetan Studies Library*, 19.
- Campbell, June. 2020. *Traveller in Space: Gender, Identity and Tibetan Buddhism* (Revised edition). London: Continuum.
- Duo, Dala. 2024. Elderly Care and Gender Dynamics in a Tibetan Village in Northwest China: Changes and Challenges. *Asian Women* 40(1):1-21. <https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2024.3.40.1.1> accessed 7 April 2025.

- Du Jianjun 杜建军, Sun Jun 孙军, and Wang Wei 汪伟. 2014. Woguo zangzu diqu nongcun laodongli zhuan yi de diaocha sikao 我国藏族地区农村劳动力转移的调查思考 [Survey and Reflections on the Transfer of Rural Labor in Tibetan Areas of China]. *Zhongguo ruan kexue 中国软科学* [China Soft Science Magazine] 11:59-70.
- Dunzhu Luobu 顿珠罗布 and Sun Zibao 孙自保. 2019. Xinchengdai nongminggong de tezheng yu shenghuo zhuangkuang diaocha-jiyu Xizang 4407 feng diaocha wenjuan 新生代农民工的特征与生活状况调查-基于西藏 4407 份调查问卷 [A Survey of the Characteristics and Living Conditions of the New Generation of Migrant Workers-Based on 4407 Questionnaires in Tibet]. *Gaoyuan Nongye 高原农业* [Journal of Plateau Agriculture] 3(1):103-107.
- Fischer, Andrew. 2011. The Great Transformation of Tibet? Rapid Labor Transitions in Times of Rapid Growth in the Tibet Autonomous Region. *HIMALAYA, Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*, 30(1):63-77.
- Guan Xiaomei 关小梅, Wang Shiyong 王士勇, Yang Xiao 杨晓, and Wu Haiyuan 吴海园. 2015. Qianhai zangzu nongmuye jiuye zhuangkuang jiqi tedian-jiyu sange zirancun de diaoyan 青海藏族农牧民就业状况及其特点-基于三个自然村的调研 [A Study of Qinghai Tibetan Farmers in Employment Orientation and Characteristics]. *Qinghai shifan daxue xuebao 青海师范大学学报* [Qinghai Normal University Journal] 4:9-13.
- Guo Haiqing 郭海清. 2009. Cunmin waichu wugong de xingwei yanjiu-yi Ping'an xian zangzucun Y cun wei yanjiu ge'an 村民外出务工的行为研究-以平安县藏族村 Y 村为研究个案 [Research on Villagers' Behaviors of Off-farm Work-Taking the Tibetan Village Y in Ping'an County to Study]. MA thesis. Xibei Shifan Daxue 西北师范大学 [Northwest Normal University].

- Kang Hongling 亢鸿玲. 2008. Yi dagong wei beijing de funü yu fazhan wenti yanjiu-yi zhuoni xian laligou cun weili 以打工为背景的妇女与发展问题研究-以卓尼县拉力沟村为例 [Research on the Problem of Women Development Under the Background of Working Temporarily Outside-Laligou Village, Zhouni County as an Example]. MA thesis 兰州大学 Lanzhou University.
- Ma Rong 马戎 and Danzeng Lunzhu 丹增伦珠. 2012. 2008 nian xiaji Lasa, Rikaze, Zedang san chengshi liudong renkou wenjuan diaocha jieguo fenxi zongshu 2008 年夏季拉萨、日喀则、泽当三城市流动 人口问卷调查结果分析综述 [Analysis and Review of Questionnaire Survey Results of the Migrant Population in Lhasa, Shigatse, and Zedang in Summer 2008]. *Zhongguo zang xue 中国藏学 [China Tibetology]* 3:110-132.
- Makley, Charlene. 1997. The Meaning of Liberation: Representations of Tibetan Women. *The Tibet Journal* 22(2):4-29.
- Rajan, Hamsa. 2016. Tibetan Women Adapt to Qinghai Modernity. [https://www.academia.edu/29531118/ Tibetan Women Adapt to Qinghai Modernity University of Nottingham China Policy Institute blog](https://www.academia.edu/29531118/Tibetan_Women_Adapt_to_Qinghai_Modernity_University_of_Nottigham_China_Policy_Institute_blog), accessed 4 March 2025
- Sun Huanming 孙焕明. 2015. Xizang zangzu nongmuming waichu wugong qunti wenti yanjiu-jiyu Xizang ba xian nonghu de diaocha 西藏藏族农牧民外出务工群体问题研究-基于西藏 8 县农户的调查 [A study of the Problems of Tibetan Farmers and Herder Migrant Groups in Tibet: Based on a Survey of Rural Households in Eight Counties in Tibet]. *Nongye yu Jishu 农业与技术 [Agriculture and Technology]* 13:173-176.



- Sun Zibao 孙自保, Song Lianjiu 宋连久, Liu Tianping 刘天平, and Nie Qiang 聂强. 2016. Zangzu nongmumin waichu wugong yingxiang yinsu fenxi 藏族农牧民外出务工影响因素分析 [Analysis of Factors Influencing Tibetan Farmers and Herder Migrant Labors]. *Xizang Fazhan Luntan 西藏发展论坛 [Theoretical Platform of Tibetan Development]* 4:14-20.
- Tseyang, Jangngöpa and Yeshe Dhondup. 2008. Traditional Tibetan Education and Tibetan Women. *The Tibet Journal* 33(3):71-76.
- Waner Jiancuo 万二尖措. 2018. Gongtong fazhan shiyu xia Xizang nongminggong de xianzhuang ji duice yanjiu 共同发展视域下西藏农民工的现状及其对策研究 [Research on the Current Situation and Countermeasures of Migrant Workers in Tibet from the Perspective of Common Development]. MA thesis. 西藏大学 Tibet University.
- Wang Yuan 王媛. 2014. Qinghai zangzu yu huizu qunzhong waichu wugong de tezheng fenxi-yi Hualong xian zangzu A cun he huizu er cun wei ge'an 青海藏族与回族群众外出务工的特征分析-以化隆县藏族A村和回族二村为个案 [Analysis of the Characteristics of Qinghai Tibetan and Hui Migrant workers: A Case Study of Tibetan Village A and Hui Village Er in Hualong County]. *Qinghai minzu daxue (Shehui kexue) 青海民族大学 (社会科学) [Journal of Qinghai Minzu University (Social Sciences)]* 4:131-141.
- Wu, Qi. 2013. Tradition and Modernity: Cultural Continuum and Transition among Tibetans in Amdo. Ph.D. dissertation. University of Helsinki.
- Xunhua salazu zizhi xian defangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 循化撒拉族自治县地方志编纂委员会. 2017. *Xunhua salazu zizhi xianzhi 循化撒拉族自治县志 [Xunhua Salar Autonomous County Records]*. Xi'an 西安: Sanqin chubanshe 三秦出版社 [Sanqin Publishing House].

- Yang Xuai 杨须爱. 2007. Bailongjiang liuyu zangzu nongmingong liudong yu liuchudi shehui wenhua bianqian yanjiu-yi Xinpin qu weili 白龙江流域藏族农民工流动与流出地社会文化变迁研究-以新坪区为例 [Research on the Movement of Tibetan Migrant Workers in the Bailongjiang River Basin and Social Changes in Outflow Areas: A Case Study of Xinping District] MA thesis. 兰州大学 Lanzhou University.
- Zhang, Tracy Ying. 2019. Carpet Worlds: The Cultural Representation and Production of Tibetan Carpets. Ph.D. dissertation. Simon Fraser University.  
[https://summit.sfu.ca/flysystem/fedora/sfu\\_migrate/9902/ETD4864.pdf](https://summit.sfu.ca/flysystem/fedora/sfu_migrate/9902/ETD4864.pdf), accessed 4 September 2023
- Zhang Yun. 1992. Lun zangzu funü de diwei 论藏族妇女的地位 [On the Status of Tibetan Women]. *Xizang Yanjiu 西藏研究* [Tibet Research] Vol. 2.
- Zhaxi, Duo jie. 2020. Tibetan Farmers in Transition: Urbanization, Development and Labor Migration in Amdo. Ph.D. dissertation. University of Colorado-Boulder.
- Zhaxi, Duo jie. 2024. From Side-work to Main Task: Housing, Status, and Tibetan Labour Migration in Qinghai, China. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12430>, accessed 19 February 2025.

## TIBETAN TERMS

'bar tshang འབར་ཚང་།  
a chen gangs rgyal ཇམ་ཆེན་གངས་རྒྱལ།  
bde skyid བདེ་སྦྱིད།  
bla brang ལྷ་བང་།  
brag dkar བྲག་དཀར།  
bsang chu བསང་ཆུ།  
chu ka, khri ka ཆུ་ཀ་ཁྱི་ཀ།  
dbus gtsang དབུས་གཙང་།  
dkar mdzes དཀར་མཛེས།  
dred tshang དྲེད་ཚང་།  
gcan tsha གཅན་ཚ།  
gser rta གསེར་རྟ།  
khams ཁམས།  
lha mo ལྷ་མོ།  
lo sar ལོ་སར།  
ma Ni མ་ཏི།  
mdzo rgan ra bar མཛོ་རྒན་ར་བར།  
me tog མེ་ཏོག།  
mtsho byang མཚོ་བྱང་།  
mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།  
na gor mo ན་གོར་མོ།  
rgan gya གན་གྱ།  
rma chu རྩ་ཆུ།  
ru ma byung རུ་མ་བྱུང་།  
sha ba ཤ་བ།  
sha ba tsho ba ཤ་བ་ཚོ་བ།  
sog rdzong སག་རྫོང་།  
stag lha khri སྐག་ལྷ་ཁྱི།  
them chen ཐེམ་ཆེན།  
yu mo ཡུ་མོ།  
Salar srang ཟ་ལར་སྲིང་།  
zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།

'brong ri dgon pa འབྲོང་རི་དགོན་པ།  
a mdo ཇམ་མདོ།  
bis mdo བིས་མདོ།  
bla ma ལྷ་མ།  
brag sne nang བྲག་སྒྲེ་ནང་།  
chu dmar leb ཆུ་དམར་ལེབ།  
dar lag དར་ལག།  
dga' bde དགའ་བདེ།  
dp'a lung དཔའ་ལུང་།  
ed bzhed ཨེད་བཞེད།  
gcig sgril གཅིག་སྒྲིལ།  
gshong yul གཤོང་ཡུལ་།  
klu mo thang ལྷ་མོ་ཐང་།  
lha sa ལྷ་ས།  
ma Ni khang མ་ཏི་ཁང་།  
mdo la མདོ་ལ།  
mdzod dge མཛོད་དག།  
mgo log མགོ་ལོག།  
mtsho mo མཚོ་མོ།  
mtsho sngon po མཚོ་སྔོན་པོ།  
rebgong རེབ་གོང་།  
rgya ri ma sgang ལྷ་རི་མ་སྐང་།  
rma stod རྩ་སྟོད།  
sgrol ma སྐྱོལ་མ།  
sha ba tshang ཤ་བ་ཚང་།  
skye dgu mdo སྐྱེ་དགུ་མདོ།  
srung སྲུང་།  
the ge ཐེ་གེ།  
ya rdzi ཡ་རུའི།  
yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ།  
zhor las ཞོར་ལས།

## CHINESE TERMS

Dari 达日	<i>dibao</i> 低保
Gande 甘德	Ganjia 甘加
Gannan 甘南	Ganzi 甘孜
Ge'ermu 格尔木	<i>goji</i> 枸杞
<i>gongshe</i> 公社	Haibei 海北
Haixi 海西	Han 汉
Henan 河南	Hongqi 红旗
Hualong 化隆	Huashixia 花石峡
Hui 回	Jiangsu 江苏
Jianzha 尖扎	Jiegu 结古
Jiezi 街子	Jiuzhi 久治
Kekexili 可可西里	Lanzhou 兰州
Maduo 玛多	Mgo log 果洛
<i>mu</i> 亩	<i>nashi</i> 纳什
Ningxia 宁夏	Qilian 祁连
Qinghai 青海	<i>qinjiu</i> 秦茺
Qumalai 曲麻莱	Rimaxiong 日麻雄
Ruo'er gai 若尔盖	Sala 撒拉
Seda 色达	Shanghai 上海
Shanxi 陕西	Sichuan 四川
Suzhou 苏州	Tianjun 天峻
Tongren 同仁	Wanda 万达
Wendou 文都	Xi'an 西安
Xiahe 夏河	Xiangyu 相玉
Ximen 西门	Xinghai 兴海
Xining 西宁	Xunhua 循化
Yinchuan 银川	Yushu 玉树
Zhengzhou 郑州	

## POLICY BRIEF

## PROMOTING EQUITABLE AND QUALITY COMPULSORY EDUCATION IN CHINA<sup>1</sup>

Mkha' 'gro tshe ring མཁའ་གྲོ་ཙེ་རིང་། (Kangzuo Zeren 抗作泽仁)<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, millions of PR China families have invested heavily in their children's extracurricular off-campus classes to improve their academic performance on examinations. This has significantly increased students' workloads and imposed substantial economic pressure on families. It has also affected Chinese education equity and quality over the years. To address these issues by "improving the quality of compulsory school education and regulating off-campus training centers" (China News, 2021), China released the "Double Reduction" Policy on 24 July 2021, representing an important shift in the nation's approach to educational development. The primary goals aim to alleviate the academic burden on students in compulsory education and the financial pressure on families. It aims to elevate the quality of in-school education and ensure equitable educational opportunities for all compulsory-education-aged students - an ongoing issue in China. The policy has encountered challenges in practice despite its original aims.

### KEYWORDS

China double reduction policy, education equity quality, China compulsory education

---

<sup>1</sup> Mkha' 'gro tshe ring མཁའ་གྲོ་ཙེ་རིང་། (Kangzuo Zeren 抗作泽仁). 2025. Promoting Equitable and Quality Compulsory Education in China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:212-223.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this policy brief was submitted as a term paper to the Policy and Practice Issues in International Education and Development module during my postgraduate studies at the University of Sussex, 2023-2024.

## INTRODUCTION

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal for education (SDG 4) indicators 4.1: "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education" (UN 2023).

Equity is associated with fairness and other educational benefits, considering every person's circumstances (Espinoza 2007). Given the world's second-largest population, China has been experiencing the challenge of Fraser's (2020) "framework of redistribution," whereas Keddie (2012) posits that schools are not equitable in their resource distribution and students do not have equitable access to them. The disparity between eastern developed cities and western rural areas has exposed the unfairly allocated pedagogical resources that hinder education equity and quality over the years. In further response to the United Nations' SDG 4, China launched Shuangjian Zhengce 双减政策 'Double Reduction' Policy' (DRP) in 2021.

DRP aims to improve education quality, classroom teaching, and after-school services within schools to increase educational equity (Battaglia, 2008; Bhardwaj, 2019 cited in Li et al. 2023). This policy brief discusses and demonstrates Chinese education equity and quality in the context of DRP. The brief will begin with a short methodology followed by the policy context, including its original intentions and practical implementation. The findings will then be analyzed from diverse scholarly perspectives and conclude with recommendations to the government as the policymaker, teachers/researchers, and parents to potentially enhance the positive impact of DRP.

## METHODOLOGY

This policy brief used desk-based research and a review of relevant literature as evidence. Sources were identified through Google Scholar and the University of Sussex online library. Findings on post-DRP implementation were drawn from pertinent journals and articles and analyzed to formulate

recommendations for improved nationwide policy monitoring and evaluation. This research briefly provides a concise examination of DRP. The general focus is on educational equity and quality in the post-DRP period with a comparative analysis of urban and rural areas in China.

## POLICY OVERVIEW

Placing children in school is insufficient for learning (Hickey and Hossain 2019). Equity and quality of education matter, which is why the United Nations emphasizes "inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN 2023). As equity is often referred to as justice (Espinoza 2007) in the East and the West, equity is considered a vital concern in education (Liu 2023). China released the nationwide "Double Reduction" Policy on 24 July 2021 to promote equity in quality education for compulsory-aged students.

### Policy Necessity

Chinese education has been portrayed as exhausting for both parents and children since the 1990s. The education system is examination-driven and score-oriented. Students' heavy homework and their parents' financial pressure for off-campus classes have been a continuous government concern.

Initially, Chinese compulsory-education-aged students were assigned excessive homework they took to their homes to complete. However, the educational motivation of studying for examinations did not substantially contribute to their learning, while it benefited the tutoring industry at considerable expense to families. Guo (2022) notes that students and their parents want a competitive edge in admission to selective universities, striving for good grades.

Secondly, according to Yao (2022), China's tutoring market grew from 264.2 billion yuan to 528.6 billion *yuan* in 2015-2019, with statistics indicating 47.3% of families had children in after-school



classes. Guo (2022) further suggests that after formal schools are dismissed, it becomes normal for compulsory-aged students to attend after-school training, which increases the academic burden of students as much as disturbs the steady development of schools through intensified social inequity among different students. This scenario added to both students' academic and families' financial pressure. It has widened the education gap between rich and poor and between urban and rural, where poor families cannot afford to send their children for costly off-campus training, and rural areas lack such classes. Therefore, Zhu (2023) elaborated that [before DRP], education equity was strongly affected by differences in family income, increasing educational inequality between students with different family backgrounds, which impedes the possibility of education equity.

### DRP Launch

Drawing on the background mentioned above, the double reduction policy was issued to reduce students' excessive academic workload and ease their parents' financial burden for after-school supplementary, ensuring education equity and enhancing quality and equality in schools. DRP reduces the amount of homework assigned to students in a restricted duration as shown in the following:

Schools are to ensure no written homework for the first and second graders of primary school with only appropriate exercises in school; the overall amounts and duration of written homework for grades three to six shall not exceed 60 minutes and should be within 90 minutes for junior middle school students. Written homework was largely required to be completed during school hours (China News 2021).

Under DRP, teachers are fully obligated to complete students' in-school homework and solve learning issues within the school, leading to eliminating families' additional costs for off-campus tutorials. To make schooling more enjoyable, DRP promotes

enriching after-school activities for students to explore and develop their hobbies:

... schools are to develop plans for after-school services, making full use of their after-school time for a variety of science popularization, culture, sports, art, labor, reading, interest groups and club activities to improve students' knowledge, skills and competencies (China News 2021).

Overall, Wang (2022) explains that this aims to reduce students' academic workload and extracurricular classes while also lightening the families' costs of extra tutoring. DRP reduces the quantity of homework without compromising its quality. Teachers' qualifications in class are improved to cope with their heightened responsibility more efficiently. DRP advocates student-centered education so that they will learn adequately in schools and promotes a "quality education [that] develops the skills, values, and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives" (UNESCO 2015).

### DRP's Impact

The core foundation of an education system is education equity, inclusion, quality, and lifelong sustainability, and DRP is to promote a sustainable education system (Zhou and Qi 2021 cited in Li et al. 2023). As UNESCO (2015) stated, "No education target should be considered met unless met by all," regarding education quality and equity, DRP has positive impacts on China's education in general, but there are downsides to its outcomes as follows.

### Education Equity among Rich-Poor

In post-DRP, after-school tutoring has shifted to costly private home-based teaching for privileged families, disadvantaging low- and middle-income ones. DRP has widened the gap

between different income groups (Xue and Li 2023). Anxieties arise among urban parents about limiting homework and off-campus tutoring, which will impede their children's pursuit of academic excellence. When parents view their children's educational success as crucial to their social status (Jin and Sun, 2022), the pressure continues to be placed on students to fulfill their parents' expectations. Thus, the expensive gray areas have emerged, while the quality of school education and teaching levels remain suboptimal. Guo (2021) highlights that the wealthy hire highly educated tutors, leaving others with limited educational options due to the complete closure of tutoring institutions. It appears to be leading to greater long-term inequity. After all, students from urban areas are ultimately doing the same amount of homework, and their parents are investing in extracurriculars.

#### Parent Involvement

After DRP, in contrast to parents from urban cities, many rural parents have distanced themselves from their children's education and teachers or schools. Song (2022) states that some parents consider education the teachers' responsibility, i.e., teachers must teach and educate children. With DRP, rural parents' involvement in their children's learning appears dramatically deficient. Inadequate interaction occurs with teachers to understand the policy and educational resources available for their children. The absence of communication between these two key stakeholders did not bridge the students' learning gap and equalize pedagogical resources compared with urban schools.

#### Rural-Urban Disparity

China's policies concerning rural education fall short of addressing the specific needs of rural areas. The goal of a policy is to maximize educational resources. Still, its implementation lacks an inclusive understanding of the rural situation (Xue et al. 2021). The decision of DRP is no exception. DRP intends to

improve in-classroom teaching efficiency, but the comparative scarcity of qualified teachers in rural areas has accompanied low professionalism and service quality in after-school services (Zhang et al. 2023). The poor quality of teaching and unfairly distributed resources have exacerbated the urban-rural discrepancy. An interviewee in Xue et al. (2023) states that the rural education DRP was launched as 'one size fits all' and is attached to urban education in the present policy context, despite a huge disparity between urban and rural education resources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICAL IMPACT

Achieving equity in education requires appropriately distributing resources to support all students, including teachers having strong theoretical knowledge of differentiated instruction and the skills to effectively apply it to support students' learning and well-being (OECD, 2023). In line with the findings above, it is vital to propose applicable recommendations to the main stakeholders for a more positive impact.

Recommendation 1: Monitoring and evaluation are crucial in ensuring that policies are introduced to an education system to enhance equity and effectively implemented to reach ultimate goals (OECD, 2023). China's central government as the main policymaker, must establish comprehensive mechanisms for the local government to monitor and evaluate DRP for its effectiveness and adaptability while regulating tutoring firms to prevent it from becoming exclusive to privileged families. As emphasized by Jin et al. (2022), educational equity is the foundation of social equity and must not be a luxury for the wealthy. As a DRP's goal, the central government must design initiatives to improve the quality of school education. Only this will prevent grey areas that continue affecting education equity among rich and poor, and urban and rural areas. To achieve this objective, increasing funding for teacher training, for instance, is essential, ensuring that teachers are better equipped to handle their increased responsibilities. This will reduce parents' anxieties about pushing their children to the limits of

their expectations. The government must support schools in developing and diversifying after-school activities to enrich students' schooling experience by making learning fun.

Recommendation 2: As Xue et al. (2023) highlight the crucial role of parents as "family-teacher" in their children's education, a close collaboration between teachers and parents is critical for children's schooling life. Parents from rural areas must be personally involved with their children's school subjects, class arrangements, and daily lives. Epstein and Salinas (2004) further emphasize the importance of engaging with parents, which enables schools to gain a deeper insight into a student's background - a crucial involvement for supporting students' progress in learning. Keddie's (2012) argument that cultural disadvantages limit students' learning suggests that teachers must also develop a basic understanding of students' cultural backgrounds.

Teachers and parents collectively support students' all-around development by exchanging updated school plans, resources, and spaces for further improvement, thereby elevating students' learning and enriching their educational experiences. Espinoza (2007) notes that fairness/equity becomes possible when rewards and resources are distributed based on individual needs. Therefore, for instance, rural schools either lack various reading materials in their libraries or have no libraries at all. Teachers and parents can work together to propose the need for well-equipped libraries with a diverse range of reading materials and the necessities of modern learning technologies to increase pedagogical parities and minimize the gap in urban-rural learning resources.

Recommendation 3: The teachers/researchers, as the key implementors of DRP, must conduct thorough assessments and community-based research to investigate challenges in rural education, ideally with relevant local government. Their findings should be reported to the central government as a reflection of DRP. In Ball's (1993:11) words, "purposes and intentions [of policies] are re-worked and re-oriented over time," so it is crucial

to make micro-adjustments for rural areas within DRP's three-year plan, rather than struggling with policies started in urban areas and imposed on rural areas. One size doesn't fit all. Knowing that "policy as discourse may have the effect of redistributing voice" (Ball, 1993:15), parents' and students' voices should be considered in policy research and planning, if not in the decision-making process, for rural-based needs. This inclusion ensures that policies are responsive to the distinct rural context and the need for equitable quality education, which is the original goal of DRP.

The recommendations are intended for policymakers, teachers, researchers, and parents to carefully consider and implement accordingly, effectively addressing the findings and achieving an equitable, high-quality compulsory education in line with the goals of DRP. Epstein and Salinas (2004) refer to a 'school learning community' with policymakers, educators, students, and parents working together to enhance the school environment and ensure optimal learning opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

China's double reduction policy is a nationwide educational reform policy. As a member of the United Nations, China's DRP signifies a step towards reforming education equity and quality, and significant progress in the education system. Nevertheless, the recurrence of issues before DRP is presented through the findings, reflecting the current situation of post-DRP. Consequently, the central government must support the relevant implementors in monitoring and evaluating DRP's implementation and impact in rural and urban areas to identify different needs. The government, teachers/researchers, and parents must work closely together to oversee and improve DRP's original goals to promote and realize ultimate quality education and equitable access for all in China.

## REFERENCES

- Ball, Stephen J. 1993. What is Policy? Texts, Trajectories and Toolboxes. *The Australian Journal of Education Studies*, 13(2):10-17.
- China News. July 24, 2021. Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council, Opinions on Further Alleviating the Burden of Homework and After-School Tutoring for Students in Compulsory Education. <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2021/07-24/9527700.shtml>, accessed 19 December 2023.
- Epstein, Joyce L., and Karen Clark Salinas. 2004. Partnering with families and communities. *Educational Leadership* 61(8):12-19.
- Espinoza, Oscar. 2007. Solving the Equity–Equality Conceptual Dilemma: A New Model for Analysis of the Educational Process. *Educational Research* 49(4):343-363.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2020. *From Redistribution to Recognition?: Dilemmas of Justice in a Postsocialist Age in The New Social Theory Reader*, Routledge, 188-196.
- Guo, Jingxuan. 2021. Brief Analysis of the "Double Reduction" Policy and Some Reflections. *2021 4th International Conference on Education Technology and Information System (ETIS 2021)*.
- Guo, Yihan. 2022. *The Current Impact of the Double Reduction Policy. 2021 International Conference on Education, Language and Art (ICELA 2021)*. Atlantis Press, 147-152.
- Hickey, Sam and Naomi Hossain. 2019. *The Politics of Education in Developing Countries, From Schooling to Learning*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, p. 256.
- Jin, Xuepeng, and Yirong Sun. 2022. Does Double Reduction Policy Decrease Educational Pressures on Chinese Family?. *in 2021 International Conference on Education, Language and Art (ICELA 2021)*, 771 – 776. Atlantis Press.

- Keddie, Amanda. 2012. Schooling and Social Justice through the Lenses of Nancy Fraser. *Critical Studies in Education* 53(3):263–279.
- Li, Jian, Eryong Xue, Chang Liu, and Xingcheng Li. 2023. Integrated Macro and Micro Analyses of Student Burden Reduction Policies in China: Call for a Collaborative "Family–school–society" Model. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10(1):184.
- Liu, Xiaoxu. 2023. Ethnic Minority Students' Access, Participation and Outcomes in Preparatory Classes in China: A Case Study of a School of Minzu Education. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 43(1):173-188.
- OECD. 2023. Equity and Inclusion in Education: Finding Strength through Diversity. OECD Publishing, Paris.  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/e9072e21-en>, accessed 27 December 2024.
- Song, Mumian. 2022. Under the Implementation of Double Reduction Policy: Relationships Between Teachers and Parents. *2021 International Conference on Education, Language and Art (ICELA 2021)*, 800-804. Atlantis Press.
- The United Nations. 2023. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.  
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>, accessed 19 December 2023.
- UNESCO's Incheon Declaration and SDG4 - Education 2030 Framework for Action\  
[https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en\\_2.pdf](https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf), accessed 20 December 2023.
- Wang, Qichao, Xiaotong Luo, and Jie Yang. 2022. Understanding China's Double Reduction Policy on Educational Economy. *Global Economic Observer* 10(1):63-69.



- Xue, Eryong, and Jian Li. (2023) What is the Value Essence of "Double Reduction" (Shuang Jian) Policy in China? A Policy Narrative Perspective. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 55(7):787-796.
- Xue, Eryong, Jian Li, and Xingcheng Li. 2021. Sustainable Development of Education in Rural Areas for Rural Revitalization in China: A Comprehensive Policy Circle Analysis. *Sustainability* 13(23):13101.
- Yao, Yina. 2022. The Impact of the Double Reduction Policy on the Development of Quality-oriented Education in 2022. *3rd International Conference on Mental Health, Education and Human Development (MHEHD 2022)*, 1131-1135. Atlantis Press.
- Zhu, Hongye. 2023. Discussion on How to Realize Educational Equity in China from the Perspective of Double Reduction Policy. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 8:1817-1821.
- Zhang, Lixin 章丽欣, Ruiqi Guan 管瑞祺, Wenjin Luo 罗文锦, Huiyuan Tang 唐慧媛, and Xiyao Zhang 张曦瑶. 2023. Shuangjian zhengce shiyu xia nongcun yiwu jiaoyu fazhan de lujing tanxi "双减" 政策视域下农村义务教育发展的路径探析 [Analysis of the Path of Rural Compulsory Education Development from the Perspective of "Double Reduction" Policy]. *Vocational Education*, 12(02):163-172.

## A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

## HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY AND OCCUPATIONAL REALITIES OF COLLEGE GRADUATES FROM DZORGE COUNTY, PR CHINA<sup>1</sup>

Mkha' 'gro tshe ring མཁའ་གྲོ་ཙེ་རིང་། (Kangzuo Zeren 抗作泽仁)

### ABSTRACT

Human capital theory addresses the assumption that investment in education yields economic returns and improved productivity through employment prospects and posits that education increases individual and societal development through knowledge and skill acquisition. This paper critically reviews the literature on the theoretical feasibility of human capital and the rates of return in the context of higher education available for students from China's rural Dzorge County. The theoretical application in practice faces challenges due to limited access to higher education resources, language barriers, and social stratification. In China's rural Tibetan areas, despite the comparatively enhanced teaching quality and resources at the regional level in the last few decades, education's economic returns for college graduates remain limited, questioning the efficacy of tertiary educational investments. Structural factors hindering potential economic outcomes are emphasized in contextualizing the disparity between educational attainment and job market opportunities for Tibetans. The conclusion reflects on theoretical limitations in rural Tibetan areas while recognizing the importance of education regardless of *de facto* outcomes.

### KEYWORDS

Human capital theory, rates of return, education ethnic Tibetans, Tibetans' educational outcome

---

<sup>1</sup> Mkha' 'gro tshe ring མཁའ་གྲོ་ཙེ་རིང་། (Kangzuo Zeren 抗作泽仁). 2025. A Critical Literature Review: Human Capital Theory and Occupational Realities of College Graduates from Dzorge County (PR China). *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:225-246.

## INTRODUCTION

According to scholars such as Becker (1993), education has been recognized as the most effective investment a country can make in its human capital due to its measurable economic returns. Formal or informal education has long been a pivotal factor in the socioeconomic development of individuals and communities. In rural Tibetan areas of China, education development has been marked by a transition from traditional monastic teachings to secular, state-driven educational initiatives within China's broader educational framework.

The late twentieth-century introduction of a national nine-year compulsory education law marked a significant shift in the educational landscape, particularly for Tibetan-inhabited regions of rural China. Despite regional educational improvements over the years, the effectiveness of investing in higher education - anticipated to foster economic opportunities - remains a concern.

According to Colclough (2012), many external factors impact what education alone can achieve. Structural factors influence monetary gains in the employment prospects of Tibetan students, aligning with access to elite universities, course options, and job market opportunities.

Discussions around human capital theory (HCT) further sparked my interest in investigating the educational outcomes of Tibetans in rural areas on a broader scale. I critically discuss the theoretical implications and practical feasibility of HCT and the rates of return (ROR) in the context of the higher education accessible for Tibetan students from Dzorge (Mdzod dge, Ruo'ergai) County, Sichuan Province, PR China. HCT considers investment in education as an important way of acquiring knowledge and skills that result in the economic development of individuals and society (Harber 2014, Colclough 2012, Becker 1993).

HCT is challenged by its anticipated returns among minority Tibetans in China. Colclough (2012) suggests Tibetans'

educational qualifications are less effective in obtaining the same entry points into the job market as before. Expected returns on higher educational investments may not align with the theory's predictions regarding the unique socio-cultural and economic environment of China's rural Tibetan areas. Consequently, my overall argument, focused on employment in the government sector, is that investment in higher education falls short in China's Tibetan areas because many graduates face challenges finding government jobs. Nevertheless, I do not deny that "to rural Tibetans, school is a place that promises progress, [while] most are still [hopefully] waiting for it to deliver" (Postiglione et al. 2006:331).

In exploring the application and limitations of HCT and ROR within the context of higher education available to Tibetans from rural China, I provide a background on educational development in Dzorge County, including the introduction of compulsory education and the limited higher education resources available. Secondly, I examine the origin and definition of HCT through its development by various scholars and critical assessments of ROR. Subsequently, I analyze the Tibetan education system in the context of HCT by highlighting the challenges Tibetan students face in securing government employment after graduation. Key factors, such as limited access to prestigious universities, language barriers, and *guanxi* 'social networks,' influence educational outcomes and job opportunities and will be contextualized through sourced literature. Finally, I summarize my findings reflecting theoretical applications and the idea that higher education enhances greater employability.

## METHODOLOGY

Christopher Colclough's 'Education, Poverty and Development – Mapping their Interconnections' (2012) is a detailed introduction to human capital theory and rates of return. This article led me to examine the literature on rural education for Tibetans in Dzorge County. Academic materials were sourced

through Google Scholar and the Google search engine during my postgraduate studies at the University of Sussex. I searched using key terms such as "human capital theory," "limits of human capital theory," and "critiques of human capital theory" while searching for China's education for minorities, using such phrases as "education for rural minorities in China," "education for minority Tibetans," "educational development in rural China," and "employment for minority college graduates. My knowledge of Tibetans and their communities in the focus site, starting from my college graduation (2008), enriched this article.

## POSITIONALITY

My positionality in this literature review is that of a member of the Tibetan community, with direct interaction with Tibetans from various regions in China. After graduating from college, my professional engagement with Tibetan communities solidified my understanding of the role of education in our communities' personal and social development.

Generally, formal education and schooling are indispensable long-term tools in equipping China's ethnic minorities with the wherewithal to alleviate poverty and pursue economic development. As a cultural insider, I explore and discuss educational access and pedagogical limits for rural Tibetan students and their post-schooling options through the lens of HCT and ROR. Receiving higher education was anticipated to provide students with stable government-sector employment.

Considering my positionality, it is important to clarify that the firsthand narratives I provide in this literature review mainly stem from my knowledge of Dzorge County. While I do not intend to generalize the interpretations across all Tibetan inhabited areas of China, many findings, such as cited educational policies, systems, and outcomes in other Tibetan areas have commonalities with Dzorge.

## HISTORY: EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA'S RURAL TIBETAN AREAS

China is a multi-ethnic country with the majority Han and fifty-five ethnic minorities (Ying 2024, Liu 2023, Yang 2022). Zhang and Archer (2024) state that the most populous minorities residing in Sichuan Province are Tibetans, Yi, and Qiang, with about six percent of the total population. Tibetans, as one of the ethnic minorities largely inhabiting rural China (Ying 2024), have "a distinctive culture and ... sophisticated writing system, as well as rich literary, medical and complex religious traditions" (Goldstein and Beall 1990 cited in Ying 2023:857). Due to significant disparities in pedagogical resources, including teaching quality and material availability, the educational opportunities for these minority students are substantially lower compared to those in central and eastern China (Zhang et al., 2024).

Educational development in rural Tibetan areas has also been long-standing. Before secular state schools began in the 1950s, Tibetans experienced monastic education rooted in Tibetan Buddhist teachings and ritual practices (Nima 2008), mostly accessed by boys and men. Monastic education has greatly preserved and protected Tibetan culture while nurturing Tibetan ethnic intellectuals (Lin 1997).

Tibetan pastoralists and farmers in Sichuan were mandated to follow the national nine-year compulsory education law established in 1986 in urban cities within the province. However, it was only officially introduced in 1995 (Gyal 2019) in Dzorge County and implemented several years later.

### A CRITICAL MOMENT IN RURAL TIBETAN EDUCATION

China launched the Xibu Da Daifa 'Open the West' campaign in late 1999 and early 2000 to drive the regional economy, develop infrastructure, and equalize public services, including education, to foster a harmonious and prosperous society. According to

Kolas and Thowsen (2005), infrastructure and telecommunications development were the main goals, while funding educational allowances was unspecified.

However, I witnessed significant infrastructural development, particularly in the education sector, in my early schooling days. As part of the campaign, China mandated the Tuigeng Huanlin 'Returning Farmland to Forest' policy that stipulated financially compensating rural households for planting trees on their farmland. This policy reduced local families' need for agricultural labor, ensuring children's availability for education. Free compulsory education was centralized and made accessible to rural children during this time. Such advancements mandated all children seven or older complete nine-year compulsory education.

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the central government initiated a series of preferential policies to support ethnic minorities in education, including establishing *minzu* 'nationalities' institutes that mainly enroll ethnic minority students (Liu 2023). China has made significant efforts to improve school facilities and broaden basic education access for rural minorities despite limited investment in teaching facilities, teacher qualification and training, curriculum development, and teaching materials for basic education programs for ethnic minorities (Meng 2004; Yang 2006 cited in Zhu 2010). The focus of rural education policy:

...has been on the construction of the "infrastructure" of rural education, ... with less attention given to the construction of the sociocultural dimensions of rural education (Xue et al. 2021:12).

While other institutions and programs are available for Tibetans from Dzorge and other minority students, this paper specifically focuses on higher education institutions/universities offering bachelor's degrees at a minimum, given that the Chinese job market predominantly recognizes full-time college-level qualifications. Therefore, a drawback regarding higher



education for Tibetans is the shortage of upper-tier/prestigious universities in Tibetan areas (Johnson and Chhetri 2000), with only teachers' colleges, *minzu* universities, or vocational schools, which will not be further discussed in this paper.

Only a few ethnic minority students enter key or upper-tier universities in China (Zhu 2010). At the same time, compulsory school enrollment rates have substantially increased since formal education was introduced to rural Tibetans from Dzorge. However, practical challenges still exist in translating educational investments into quantifiable returns and job opportunities regarding costly higher education for students from Dzorge. To better understand this, I review the definitions of HCT and ROR and their limitations.

## OVERVIEW: HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY AND RATES OF RETURN

### ORIGIN AND DEFINITION OF HCT

The concept of 'human capital theory' was initially proposed by Jacob Mincer and then developed by economists like Schultz and Becker (Colclough 2012). Over time, definitions of HCT show that investing in people leads to significant improvements on an individual level in heightened performance. Klees (2016) highlighted investments in human capital for improved education, health, and other factors that resemble investing in physical assets that benefit individuals and society. HCT is based on the belief that formal education plays a crucial and essential role in enhancing a population's productive potential (Almendarez 2011). HCT thus supports the notion that investments in education and training raise people's income and social and economic growth through imparted knowledge and skills, resulting in greater productivity, i.e., increasing individual and entity productivity in the workforce (Nafukho et al. 2004).

As a main argument, HCT considers investments in education economically productive (Colclough 2012).

Almendarez (2011) posits that higher education is pressured by public perception of economic outcomes and growth in many developing countries with skills learned and developed to increase productivity and generate higher income. Fägerlind and Saha (1983) concur that investment in education is an investment made for the population's productivity. Related arguments suggest that educational expansion accelerates economic growth, increases individual incomes, reduces social inequalities, improves health and nutrition, and helps mitigate high rates of population growth and infant mortality (Colclough 2012).

Investment in education targets developing different skills and capacities for individuals' financial gains and controlling population growth so that people can have better quality lives. Harber (2014) emphasizes that education is a valuable investment for individuals and is essential for achieving a well-educated population, which is crucial for industrial development and economic growth due to its higher productivity. Quiggin (1999) points out that in a simpler version of HCT, knowledge and skills are instrumental in increasing productivity and, all else being equal, more earnings. Education is thus an investment in economic development, not mere consumption. Formal education imparts skills and motivation to make the workforce more productive (Harber, 2014). Consequently, OECD (2024) notes that human capital can be generally defined as the accumulation of knowledge, skills, and other characteristics individuals possess, enabling them to be more productive.

However, Becker (1993) questions the necessity of college graduates being well-equipped for the job market upon graduation, arguing that formal or informal training programs make them suitable for their work. This applies to the situation in China. The primary purpose of educational investment for many Tibetans is that it offers diplomas and degrees that "have almost always and everywhere been considered a ticket to a white-collar occupation" (Fägerlind et al. 1983:78).

Occupational requirements typically only recognize tangible diplomas, while intangible knowledge is a different matter. Once candidates have obtained diplomas that qualify them to participate in and pass examinations for employment opportunities, they can acquire practical skills through experience. Therefore, education, arguably the best investment in human capital, does not only occur in a formal school.

Becker (1993) further claims that learning and training also occur at job sites, pointing out that on-the-job training is a key source of increased earnings through learning new skills and improving existing knowledge on the job. Therefore, on-the-job training is referred to as one of the three components (early human capital and formal education are the other two) of human capital (e.g., Lynch and Black 1995 cited in Fuente and Ciccone 2003).

Familial impact on children's well-being and learning also needs consideration. According to Becker (1993), family influence on children's learning, skills, values, and habits cannot be neglected in discussions related to HCT. Farmers in rural Dzorge County illustrate how family background influences children's future. Students make different choices and decisions in their educational careers according to their varying family backgrounds. Wealthier families are more likely to prioritize their children's higher education options and post-graduation pursuits, leveraging their well-established social networks. On the contrary, underprivileged parents lack the relevant knowledge to help their children make reasonable decisions for further education or in society with their inadequate networks.

## CONCEPT OF ROR

A fundamental aspect of human capital theory is the rates of return analysis that considers education central in explaining why individuals with higher education earn more than those with lower levels. ROR demonstrates returns generated from investment in education (Harber 2014) based on the years of

schooling, employability, and the level of earnings through educational attainment. Colclough (2012) specifically argues that a main method of assessing the connection between income and education, whether between various education levels, among different nations, or across time, is by determining wage returns related to education, according to data from job markets or household surveys.

Drawing on my empirical knowledge, the return on education in rural Dzorge of China is not solely measured by the potential for increased earnings. A secure job, particularly within the public sector, is highly valued, regardless of salary level. China's planned economic system dictates a unified payment structure for public sector employees despite ongoing shifts toward a market-based economy. A life-long government job is thereby considered a successful investment in education. The nature of the job determines whether the education costs are worthwhile. It should be noted that Harber (2014) highlights the challenges of calculating methods for rates of return on educational investments and obtaining reliable data in developing countries. This critique is one of the limitations of the theories detailed below.

#### LIMITATIONS OF HCT AND ROR

The limitations of HCT and ROR have drawn attention. HCT has strongly connected the concept of education with productivity:

...highly educated workers are considered highly skilled and thus more productive, and higher productivity is associated with better earnings (Leoni 2023:228).

Although more educated people seemingly earn higher incomes, Colclough (2012) questions if those who emerge from schooling have learned what directly benefits employers or if such individuals can acquire vocational skills that employers need

more quickly and easily. Expanding on this point, Harber (2014) argues HCT assumes higher earnings for educated individuals, indicating greater productivity and the assumption of a better match between education and the job market. This overlooks other factors, such as jobs with higher incomes due to historical reasons or more educated people from better family backgrounds with good social networks. This supports Klees' (2016) view that we cannot accurately calculate educational returns if we ignore external impacts.

Opposed to HCT, 'screening theory' argues the validity of individuals with higher education potentially have higher earnings, claiming that one's employability attributes the cause to the signaling effect of a degree or certificates as organizational hiring requirements (Dobbs et al. 2008. Rohling 1986 cited in Cooper and Davis 2017). Education is a tool for filtering and identifying those with inherent potential, abilities, and qualities sought by prospective employers rather than directly adding market value to their output (Dore 1976, Oxenham 1984 cited in Harber 2014).

Becker (1993) points out another limitation of HCT and ROR: excessive emphasis on the economic perspective and quantifiable outcome of education while the effects on individual health and general well-being are ignored. Health and nutrition are important investment aspects of human capital, especially in developing countries where deficits in these areas can greatly impact people's ability to participate in productive activities (Fuente et al. 2003). Although challenging to measure quantitatively, health and nutritional improvements of qualitative benefits are likely to be the most important contribution of education (Sweetland 1996). Education alone does not translate the obtained skill for productivity into rewards (Leoni 2023). This will be contextualized in the following section, which critiques real-world theoretical implications.

## CONTEXT: HCT IN THE CONTEXT OF TIBETAN EDUCATION

HCT considers education an investment in imparting knowledge and building skills so people are more productive and economically beneficial to society and themselves. Yet, as a minority group, implicit factors include Tibetans' limited access to elite universities and job market language barriers. These factors influence choices available for minority students from Dzong County regarding university entrance and opportunities for paid jobs post-graduation. HCT's theoretical implications have idealized linkages between education and work. Its practical feasibility reveals limitations for China's rural areas, regardless of their educational attainment. As Crossouard et al. (2021:126) argued, "HCT conceptualizes work – and in particular the privileging of wage employment" with the application of HCT in producing substantial returns on initial investments in formal education is challenged in practice.

## EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS AND JOB ELIGIBILITY

Education and investment in human capital appear feasible paths for Tibetans in Dzong County seeking financial prosperity as individuals and for society as a whole. However, this path does not always lead to the expected results. Colclough (2012) has stated that most employment requirements are standardized by the educational qualifications that decide job eligibility. For instance:

Given the overwhelming number of applicants compared to available positions, many employers in China use employ criteria such as "211" or "985" status of their bachelor's degree when screening candidates, leading to what is commonly referred to as "First Degree Discrimination" ... although the Chinese government's objectives are opposite from this situation (Yang 2024:159-160).

Public and private sectors in Dzorge demonstrate a preference for candidates who have graduated from prestigious institutions, specifically the 985 and 211 universities with majors aligning with the presented vacancy. Although there are rarely explicit laws from the local government, implicit filtering processes exist, as screening theory claims. Zhang et al. (2024) explain that the *min kao min* is broadly available in ethnic minority regions but with fewer slots for the *gaokao* 'college entrance examination'. While *min kao han* candidates have broader options for institutions and programs and are thus potentially:

in a better position to amass cultural capital from credentials and social capital through expanded social networks, which are converted into social and economic opportunities in the job market (Tang et al. 2016 cited in Zhang et al. 2024:8).

Consequently, Zhu (2010) notes the limited opportunities for ethnic minority students to enroll in prestigious universities compared to Han Chinese students. He continues that this situation potentially influences ethnic minority students' personal development, social mobility, and future growth. Yang (2024) points out that regardless of Liu's (2023) recognition of China's preferential policies, such as bonus points for ethnic minority students on the *gaokao*, regional disparities in pedagogical resources to prepare students mean that not all students have an equal chance to attend the same prestigious universities.

Luo (2024) further specified the geographical differences as a significant disparity in China's *gaokao*. He notes an uneven distribution of pedagogical resources between certain developed regions and impoverished areas regarding educational resources and quality significantly affects students' competitiveness on the *gaokao*. As a result, minority students, including Tibetans from Dzorge, rarely enroll in elite universities that would potentially

lead to better employment prospects from human capital investment.

## COMPETITIVE JOB MARKET AND LANGUAGE BARRIERS

The current job market in China has become a critical question to human capital investment. Current employment opportunities for college students have become more limited in China, with employment rates experiencing downward trends. The globally shared disastrous COVID-19 pandemic affected the employment market (Xiang et al. 2023). In addition to the COVID-19 impact, significant college enrollment rates resulted in a growing number of graduates, leading to employment competitiveness (Mao et al. 2022):

The outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic in early 2020 not only has a great impact on China's social economy, but also has a great impact on the employment status and psychological expectations of college graduates (Natali 2022). Due to the expansion of enrollment in colleges and universities over the years, the number of college graduates in China exceeded 10 million for the first time in 2022, reaching 10.76 million. In addition, there was a sudden epidemic in some areas, and the employment of graduates faced multiple problems, such as supply pressure, tight demand, and structural contradiction (Mao et al. 2022:02)

Rural Tibetans from Dzorge prioritize work opportunities in the government sector as the most attractive, which means a permanent position until qualifying for a comfortable retirement on government pensions. The government sector remains the primary source of suitable official jobs for Tibetan college graduates. Yet, for official government examinations in Dzorge County, only some specific positions, such as Tibetan language teachers, require applicants to take examinations in Tibetan and Chinese. Other examinations are offered only in Chinese, and all candidates,



regardless of nationality, can compete for employment opportunities in ethnic minority areas. Castro Campos (2013) notes that higher education success is closely associated with proficiency in Mandarin, as it is the primary language of instruction in China. Minority groups who speak ethnic languages at home typically have weaker Mandarin skills than Han [majority students]. Most occupational examinations are mainly in Mandarin, requiring Dzongkha Tibetan participants to compete with native speakers. For example:

In particular, jobs that are deemed appropriate for university graduates are biased, through their recruitment processes, towards those who possess stronger Chinese language skills and related cultural aptitudes (Fischer and Zenz 2018:527-528).

The government encourages higher university enrollment as it indicates educational success. However, the current unemployment crisis results in a growing number of unemployed graduates every year. The employment prospects for college graduates have become increasingly challenging. In the current competitive employment landscape, high investment in higher education is less ensuring for the desired outcomes of Tibetan students from Dzongkha for stable governmental jobs than in the past.

#### GUANXI AS SOCIAL NETWORK

Investment in human capital theoretically argues that nurturing a more educated populace is linked to consolidating social justice within a society. However, taking a Chinese social and cultural phenomenon for example, *guanxi* as social networks is "often mobilized to influence some key person's decision making to achieve desirable results" (Luo 1997:45). In a society where influence primarily dwells within interconnections and social networks, the human capital theory encounters limitations in its application. Despite the current policies to prevent social and

political corruption, *guanxi* plays a decisive role in China's society. In Dzorge County, students from families with strong social connections are more likely to achieve anticipated career success through education. Luo (2008) posits that all types of people misuse *guanxi* and that corruption happens daily for different purposes, from businesspeople to apprehensive parents concerned about their children's education opportunities and job-seeking college students. Hence, *guanxi* holds helpful ties to get things done. Weng and Xu (2018) detailed the process of using *guanxi* in seeking job:

The use of *guanxi* requires that an intermediary helper act as a bridge to pass job information to the job seeker or influence the potential employer's hiring decision. Typically, the selection of this helper takes into consideration their familiarity and the strength of *guanxi* with the job seeker. Further, trustworthiness is also important because the exchange between the two parties can be informal or even illegal (Weng and Xu 2018:71).

Therefore, access to information is critical within the circle of personal relations. Tibetan families with greater advantages in social networks may be able to enroll their children in a diverse field of opportunities. For instance, Luo (1997) states that social networks can provide trustworthy, richer, and more useful information to make more informed decisions. On the contrary, Dzorge Tibetan parents from socially disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter challenges finding well-paid work for their children despite acquiring the same qualifications. Therefore, given the transferable nature of *guanxi*, these existing social hierarchies extend and strengthen social stratifications for future generations instead of creating a more equitable situation where people gain equal resources to make investment in human capital fairer.

Education has significant potential to promote social and personal development for rural minority communities, given that it is a "particularly crucial role in today's knowledge-based

economy" (Fuente et al. 2003:7). China's rural minorities, including Tibetans, will gradually achieve equivalence in educational spheres if equitable access to high-quality education and prestigious universities is provided.

## CONCLUSIONS

Human capital theory suggests that investing in education yields economic benefits for individuals by enhancing their knowledge and skills. Rates of Return arguably provide the most quantifiable measurement for HCT. This article critically examined the applicability of HCT in rural Dzong County by analyzing the educational options available to local students, their subsequent job eligibility, and broader socioeconomic implications. Education does impart knowledge to students. However, my findings from the sourced literature addressed the inherent challenges posed by external factors that Tibetan students face in the job market, which impede their economic returns. A nuanced understanding was provided of how education as an investment in human capital translates into real-world outcomes for rural Tibetans, highlighting disparities and potential areas for HCT to address further.

In rural Tibetan areas, the theoretical applications of HCT vary according to diverse social and cultural circumstances, where its implications are often challenged. Education's importance is not questioned in a knowledge-based economy and society (Olssen and Peters 2005), even though discrepancies between expectations and opportunities challenge HCT's premise of education leading to enhanced governmental job opportunities and economic returns. The gap between theoretical implications and pedagogical realities affects rural Tibetans' educational trajectories and employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the government has emphasized the importance of education for its minorities and intends to improve educational opportunities, such as special considerations in university admission processes. Overall,

investment in education and formal schooling undeniably signifies substantial prospects for rural Tibetans and future generations in Dzong County.

## REFERENCES

- Almendarez, Leroy. 2011. Human Capital Theory: Implications for Educational Development. *Belize Country Conference Paper*.  
<https://global.uwi.edu/sites/default/files/bnccde/belize/conference/papers2010/almendarez.html>, accessed 29 December 2024.
- Becker, Gary S. 1993. *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Castro Campos, Bente. 2013. Human Capital Differences or Labor Market Discrimination? The Occupational Outcomes of Ethnic Minorities in Rural Guizhou (China). *Studies on the Agricultural and Food Sector in Central and Eastern Europe* No. 73.  
<https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/88183/1/773110720.pdf>, accessed 29 December 2024.
- Colclough, Christopher. 2012. Education, Poverty and Development – Mapping Their Interconnections. *Comparative Education*, 48(2):135-148.
- Cooper, Joy, and Larry Davis. 2017. Exploring Comparative Economic Theories: Human Capital Formation Theory vs Screening Theory. *Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 19(6):68-73.
- Crossouard, Barbara, Máiréad Dunne, and Carolina Szyp. 2021. The Social Sandscape of Education and Work in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa' *in* J Sumberg (ed) *Youth and the Rural Economy in Africa: Hard Work and Hazard*. 1st ed. UK: CABI, 125-140.

- De la Fuente, Angel, and Antonio Ciccone. 2003. *Human Capital in a Global and Knowledge-based Economy: Final Report. Vol. 918*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- Fägerlind, Ingemar, and Lawrence J Saha. 1983. Education, Economic Growth and Employment, in *Education and National Development*, Elsevier, 63-91.
- Fischer, Andrew M and Adrian Zenz. 2018. The Limits to Buying Stability in Tibet: Tibetan Representation and Preferentiality in China's Contemporary Public Employment System. *The China Quarterly* 234:527-551.
- Gyal, Huatse. 2019. "I am Concerned with the Future of my Children": The Project Economy and Shifting Views of Education in a Tibetan Pastoral Community. *Critical Asian Studies* 51(1):12-30.
- Harber, Clive. 2014. *Education and International Development: Theory, Practice and Issues*. Didcot, Oxford, United Kingdom: Symposium Books.
- Johnson, Bonnie, and Nalini Chhetri. 2000. Exclusionary Policies and Practices in Chinese Minority Education: The Case of Tibetan Education. *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 2.2.
- Klees, Steven J. 2016. Human Capital and Rates of Return: Brilliant Ideas or Ideological Dead Ends? *Comparative Education Review* 60(4):644-672.
- Kolas, Ashild, and Monika P Thowsen. 2005. *On the Margins of Tibet: Cultural Survival on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier*. Seattle; London: University of Washington Press, 288.
- Leoni, Silvia. 2023. A Historical Review of the Role of Education: From Human Capital to Human Capabilities. *Review of Political Economy* 1-18.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09538259.2023.2245233>, accessed 29 December 2024.
- Lin, Junhua. 1997. Brief Summary of the History of Evolution of School Education in the Ganzi Tibetan Region. *Chinese Education & Society* 30(5):7-25.

- Liu, Xiaoxu. 2023. Ethnic Minority Students' Access, Participation and Outcomes in Preparatory Classes in China: A Case Study of a School of Minzu Education. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 43(1):173-188.
- Luo, Hanyu. 2024. The Problems and Countermeasures of China's College Entrance Examination System: An Overview Study. *International Journal of Learning and Teaching* 10(5):582-589.
- Luo, Yadong. 1997. Guanxi: Principles, Philosophies, and Implications. *Human Systems Management* 16:43-52.
- Luo, Yadong. 2008. The Changing Chinese Culture and Business Behavior: The Perspective of Intertwinement between Guanxi and Corruption. *International Business Review* 17(2):188-193.
- Mao, Yufei, Yuan Zhang, Jiaxin Bai, Liangbo Zhang, and Wenxin Hu. 2022. The impact of COVID-19 on the Employment Status and Psychological Expectations of College Graduates: Empirical Evidence from the Survey Data of Chinese Recruitment Websites. *Frontiers in Psychology* 13:1039945.
- Nafukho, Fredrick Muyia, Nancy Hairston, and Kit Brooks. 2004. Human Capital Theory: Implications for Human Resource Development. *Human Resource Development International* 7(4):545-551.
- Nima, Badeng. 2008. The Choice of Languages in Tibetan School Education Revisited. *Chinese Education & Society*, 41(6):50-60.
- OECD. 2024. *Human Capital and Educational Policies*. OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/human-capital-and-educational-policies.html>, accessed 28 December 2024.
- Olssen, Mark and Michael A Peters. 2005. Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge economy: from the Free Market to Knowledge Capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy* 20(3):313-345.

- Postiglione, Gerard, Ben Jiao, and Sonam Gyatso. 2006. Household Perspectives on School Attendance in Rural Tibet. *Educational Review* 58(3):317–337.
- Quiggin, John. 1999. Human Capital Theory and Education Policy in Australia. *The Australian Economic Review* 32(2): 130-144.
- Sweetland, Scott R. 1996. Human Capital Theory: Foundations of a Field of Inquiry. *Review of Educational Research* 66(3): 341-359.
- Wang, Xunhua, Jiayuan Wu, and Yang Yang. 2023. Strengthening the Consciousness of the Chinese National Community to Promote High-Quality Development in Ethnic Regions: Based on Fieldwork in 12 Villages in the Ruorgai Region. *International Journal of Education and Humanities* 9(2):67-72.
- Weng, Yulei, and Hao Xu. 2018. How Guanxi Affects Job Search Outcomes in China? Job Match and Job Turnover." *China Economic Review* 51:70-82.
- Xiang, Beishan, Huiying Wang, and Huimin Wang. 2023. Is There a Surplus of College Graduates in China? Exploring Strategies for Sustainable Employment of College Graduates. *Sustainability* 15(21):15540.
- Xue, Eryong, Jian Li, and Xingcheng Li. 2021. Sustainable Development of Education in Rural Areas for Rural Revitalization in China: A Comprehensive Policy Circle Analysis. *Sustainability* 13(23):13101.
- Yang, Jiahang. 2024. The Dilemma of Chinese Postgraduate Employment: First-Degree Discrimination. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 27:159-165.
- Yang, Jingyi. 2022. Preferential Policies in Higher Education for Minorities in China. *2022 6th International Seminar on Education, Management and Social Sciences (ISEMSS 2022)*. Atlantis Press.
- Ying, Ji. 2024. Education for Development: Professional Commitments and Practices among Tibetan Teachers in Northwest China. *Educational Review* 76(7):1842-1856.

- Ying, Yumjyi Ji. 2023. "To be Included among People": Families' Perceptions of Schooling and Contingent Negotiations in a Rural Tibetan Community in China. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 53(5):855–872.
- Zhang, Yuqian, and D Eric Archer. 2024. Expanding Access to Undergraduate Higher Education for China's Ethnic Minority Populations. *Journal of Critical Global Issues*, 1(1): Article 7.  
<https://doi.org/10.62895/2997-0083.1003>, accessed 27 January 2025.
- Zhu, Zhiyong. 2010. Higher Education Access and Equality Among Ethnic Minorities in China. *Chinese Education & Society* 43(1):12–23.

## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Dzorge, mdzod dge མཛོད་དགེ

*gongwuyuan* 公务员

Kangzuo Zeren 抗作泽仁

*min kao han* 民考汉

Ngawa, rnga ba རྒྱ་བཀ

Ruo'ergai xian 若尔盖县

Sichuan 四川

Xibu Da Kaifa 西部大开发

*gaokao* 高考

*guanxi* 关系

*minzu* 民族

*min kao min* 民考民

Qiang 羌

*shiye danwei* 事业单位

Tuigeng Huanlin 退耕还林

*xingzheng zhifaquan* 行政执法权



## FILM AND AUDIO ALERTS

## DON RIN NYIN འོན་རིན་ཉིན་ TIBETAN VILLAGE'S *LAB TSE* RITUAL<sup>1</sup>

Bde skyid sgrol ma བདེ་སྐྱིད་སྒོར་མ་། (Dejizhuoma 德吉卓玛)

39 minutes 3 seconds

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14591942>

Don rin nyin Village is located in Nya lung Town, Reb gong (Tongren) County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in the eastern part of Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. Elders say our village is in a valley shaped like a sitting elephant, and we reside on its head: *don* 'ultimate truth', *rin* 'treasure', and *nyin* 'sunny side'. Together, these terms convey the idea of the true treasure of an elephant on the sunny side of a valley.

There are around forty-three families in my home community. The seventeenth day of the sixth lunar month annually is a very auspicious day for our village. We hold a *lab tse* ritual and offer incense, insert *mda' shing* in the *lab tse*, and place *gher* 'treasure' to our mountain deity, A mye brag skya, on Mount Dpal ri 'Peaceful Deity' to increase our livestock and protect villagers. It takes thirty minutes to two hours to reach Dpal ri Mountain from our village. According to village elders and family members, only men went to Dpal ri Mountain to celebrate our mountain deity before 1958. After monasteries reopened in the 1980s, it was decided that elders, men, women, and children would all go to Mount Dpal ri to attend the *lab tse* ritual and picnic there.

We prepare various items as the ritual day approaches, including *gher*, *dmu thag*, *sher rtsig*, *rlung rta*, *mda' shing*, *bsang* 'incense', milk, *rtsam pa*, yogurt, liquor, yak dung fuel, water, pots, bowls, ladles, bread, butter, and tea bricks.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bde skyid sgrol ma བདེ་སྐྱིད་སྒོར་མ་། (Dejizhuoma 德吉卓玛). 2025. Don rin nyin འོན་རིན་ཉིན་ Tibetan Village's *Lab tse* Ritual. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:248-251.

Every household gets up early on the ritual day. After washing, people wear their most beautiful Tibetan robes and new clothes. They put bread, *rtsam pa*, milk, yogurt, and other food in bags and carry them on their backs. Some people ride motorcycles while others walk to Mount Dpal ri. After reaching Mount Dpal ri, each household piles its things together. Women make a hearth with three big stones, put a big pot on the stones, and make a fire.

Water, brick tea, and milk are added to the pot, and milk tea is boiled. Since it is for offering to the mountain deity, milk from each household is poured into the pot. After the tea boils, *gher* is positioned, and participants offer incense. Next, *mda' shing* are inserted and *sher rtsig* is offered.

People, including some women, take *rtse brgya* and circumambulate the *lab tse* while chanting *ma Ni*. They give *rtse brgya* to men who are inserting *mda' shing*. Women also circumambulate and chant *ma Ni*. Men use *dmu thag* to tie the *mda' shing* and then use long silk to wrap the bottom of the *mda' shing*.

Next, milk tea is boiled. After drinking some, participants sit in a circle, put *rtsam pa*, butter, fruit, and snacks in the center among the villagers. Then eating begins. Some people perform *skor bro* 'circle dance' and sing. After eating, women go to Gnas mdum beneath the *lab tse*.

Elders describe a practitioner, Bse kyi rgyal ba byang chub bron, from our village who meditated on Mount Skya rgan grub gnas for many years. One day, he could fly and flew to Mount Dpal ri where we hold the *lab tse* ritual. Locals named the place Gnas mdum, also known as Sgrub gnas byang chub phug. He continued to meditate at Gnas mdum. During the *lab tse* ritual, village women offer incense, chant *ma Ni*, and place *gter* to remember Bse kyi rgyal ba byang chub. Women then collect their things and return home.

## TIBETAN TERMS

bzang drug བཟང་ལྗུག་, purification powder

bsang བསང་།, incense

bsang khug བསང་ཁུག་, incense bag

dmu thag དུ་ཐག་, Locally, the *dmu thag* symbolizes the ladder to the sky (grasp it to ascend to Heaven). Additionally, people believe that if the *dmu thag* is wound around the *lab tse*, it has power that remains untethered for a long time.

don ryi nyin ལྷོ་རྩི་ལྷོ་ཉིན་, Anin འཁྱེན་, The Tibetan village where the video was made.

gnas mdum, གན་མ་མདུག་, name of a place below the *lab tse*

go rti'i rgyal bo, གོ་རྩི་རྒྱལ་བོ་, diamond-shaped bread as big as two palms. Such bread is offered as incense and with *gter*.

gter khung, གཏེར་ཁུང་།, treasure hole

lab tse, lab tse ལའ་ཅེ་, are where mountain deities dwell. *Lab tse* are constructed with wooden poles resembling arrows, sheep wool thread, stones, and prayer flags, suggesting presenting weapons to the mountain deities. Locally, *lab tse* are atop mountains and renewed yearly to receive protection from mountain deities.

mda' shing, མདའ་ཤིང་།, wooden poles resembling arrows. Some *mda' shing* tops resemble arrows. Some resemble spears, swords, and guns. *Mda'shing* are not colored in Don ryi nyin Village. *Mda' shing* suggest a close relationship with the mountain deity and a state of peace and non-violence. Wooden arrows decorated with the color of blood imply that the mountain deity is more violent.

mdong mo མདོང་མོ་, diamond-shaped bread as big as two palms. Such bread is offered as incense and with *gter*.

rlung rta, རླུང་རྟ་, Rectangular pieces of paper with specific elements in fixed positions, e.g., a Garuda on the top right, a dragon on the top left, a horse in the center, a lion on the bottom right, and a tiger on the bottom left. *Rlung rta* bring good fortune to villagers and protect them.

rtsam pa, རྩ་པ་, roasted barley flour

rtse brgya, རེ་བརྒྱ།, Birch branches are tied with sheep wool and offered to the mountain deity because the birch tree has beautiful branches and is not poisonous.

sgrub gnas byang chub phug, སྒུབ་གནས་བྱང་ཆུབ་ཕུག།, alternative name for Gnas mdum

sher rsig, ཤེར་རིག་, Wheat grain is stirred as it is roasted. Some wheat grain turns black after being roasted, while others do not. The grains of two colors are mixed. Black represents yaks, and white represents sheep. The more grain provided, the better the growth of your livestock will be in the next year.

spen ma, སྤེན་མ།, tamarisk

tsha gsur, ཚ་གསུང་།, offering made by roasting a mixture of *rtsam pa* with the three whites (milk, yogurt, butter).

COLLECTING YAK HAIR IN YUL SHUL  
TIBETAN AUTONOMOUS PREFECTURE,  
MTSHO SNGON (QINGHAI) PROVINCE,  
PR CHINA<sup>1</sup>

Bkra shis rab rgyas བཀྲ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ། (Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰)

1 minute 23 seconds

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14299307>

Filmed in Thang skyid Village, 'Ba' dgon Township, Chu dmar leb County, Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, China by Bkra shis rab rgyas on 6 June 2024.

Local Tibetans collect yak hair and wool and castrate three-year-old yaks in this community annually during the sixth lunar month. This time is chosen because it coincides with the caterpillar fungi collection season. Many people come to gather caterpillar fungi and help pastoral families with yak hair collection. During yak hair collection, each family gathers wool and cuts the hair of fifty to seventy yaks. However, female yaks over three years old do not have their hair cut or wool collected. Twenty to thirty people typically help each family during yak hair collection.

Historically, tents, bags, slingshots, quilts, ties for yaks, yak hair strings, and even eye protectors were made from yak hair. In 2024, life had changed and hair was collected from two or three older yaks. There was no longer a need to make many items from yak hair. In 2024, yak hair was used to make and sell

---

<sup>1</sup> Bkra shis rab rgyas བཀྲ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ། (Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰). 2025. Collecting Yak Hair in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:252-253.

ties for yaks. If outsiders came to buy, the price for yak hair was sixty-two RMB per kilogram.

## TIBETAN TERMS

'ba' dgon འབའ་དགོན།

bkra shis rab rgyas བཀྲ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ།

chu dmar leb རྩ་དམར་ལེབ།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོན།

thang skyid ཐང་སྐྱིད།

yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Qinghai 青海

Renminbi, RMB 人民币

Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰

## AN A MDO TIBETAN PASTORAL FAMILY'S ONE MILLION WATER OFFERING<sup>1</sup>

Bkra shis rgya mtsho བར་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措)

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13924945>

13 min 51 sec

Filmed with an iPhone 12 Pro Max

Flutist: Lab sgron rgyal

Date: 4 August 2024

A Tibetan herding family's water offering ritual at Yen dar in Rka rgan Valley, Thang mgo (Tanggu) Town, 'Ba' rdzong (Tongde) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China is documented. The specific location is at a latitude of 34°59'10", longitude of 100°46'42", and an elevation of 3,766 meters above sea level.

On the morning of 3 August 2024, I drove with my nephew, Bsod nams bkra shis (b. 2014); niece, A+yon chos sgron (b. 2018), and sister-in-law Nyi ma lha mo (b. 1996) to visit the family of my maternal uncle, Ngag dbang smin grol (b. 1965). We traveled to our family pasture, Yen dar, in Rka rgan Valley, which my maternal uncle's family was using for summer grazing.

The journey from the county town to the pasture was approximately forty kilometers and took about half an hour due to the rough road through our community pasture.

Recently, my family relocated to 'Ba' rdzong County Town, and my maternal uncle's family now uses our land, paying us 40,000 RMB annually. My visit was to assist with a water offering and document it on video.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bkra shis rgya mtsho བར་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措). 2025. An A mdo Tibetan Pastoral Family's One Million Water Offering. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:254-256.



Water offerings are an important and growing social trend in our community. Traditionally, families have offered water daily to Buddhist images and statues in their shrine rooms. With increased access to information, many now emulate this practice, motivated by a Buddhist belief that offering water increases virtue. The eleventh-century Buddhist master, Atisha (982-1054), advised Tibetans that offering clear water helped accumulate merit. This practice is now widespread in Tibetan monasteries and by individual families.

I interviewed my aunt, Skal bzang sgrol ma (b. 1970), who explained that the ritual began locally in about 1994 with offerings for the healthy birth of her family's eldest son, Yum skyabs rgya (b. 2016), and to increase family merit. Initially, we aimed to offer one million water offerings, and for that aim we offer around 100,000 each summer. We have since made offerings for the second son, Tshe dpal mkhar (b. 2018), the second daughter-in-law Choe bzang sgrol ma (b. 1996), and their sons, Sras mchog rgya (b. 2022) and Phur ba skyabs (b. 2024). Unfortunately, we couldn't complete the 100,000 water offerings in 2022 because my third nephew was born that year and was ill for several years. Only recently have we been able to relax and see him in better health. We need to complete more than 100,000 offerings to reach our goal by the summer of 2025. Although we hoped to finish in the summer of 2024, the task is not easy, so we expect to accomplish it next summer.

The offering involves scattering a *bzang drug* (six precious substances: amomum tsao-ko, bamboo manna, clove, saffron, nutmeg, and *Elettaria cardamom*) powder in water in a large plastic container. On the first day, this water is offered in front of an image of Buddha Amitabha near the water offering location. The following day, the local incarnation of Buddha's image replaces Buddha's picture

During the ritual, a statue of Dzam b+ha la 'God of Wealth' is placed in a bowl on a metal folding bed at the end of a line of seven bowls. The God of Wealth and the line of seven bowls remain stationary until time to take a break. Extra bowls

are used repeatedly during the offering. A single string of beads with 108 beads is also placed on the bed. After completing one round, a bead is moved to the side to keep count of the numbers.

Four people are involved in the process. Two pour water into the offering bowls, one transfers water from the bowls into another container, and a fourth adds a small amount of water to ensure the bowls are thoroughly rinsed.

On 3 August 2024, 5,000 bowls of water were offered in the morning and 2,000 more after lunch. On 4 August 2024, 3,000 offerings were made, totaling 10,000 over these two days. My aunt's younger sister's two daughters joined us until noon because that family is my uncle's neighbor. We shared a meal under sun shades on the grassland outside the tent.

## TIBETAN TERMS

a+yon chos sgron ཨྲོན་ཆོས་སྒྱོན།

bsod nams bkra shis བསོད་ནམས་བཀྲ་ཤིས།  
choe bzang sgrol ma ཆོས་བཟང་སྒྲོལ་མ།  
lab sgron rgyal ལའ་སྒྱོན་རྒྱལ།

nyi ma lha mo ཉི་མ་ལྷ་མོ།  
rka rgan ཀ་ར་རྒྱལ།

sras mchog rgya སྤྲུང་བ་སྐྱབས།  
yen dar ཡེན་དར།

bkra shis rgya mtsho

བཀྲ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ།  
bzang drug བཟང་དུག  
dzam b+ha la རྩམ་བླ་ལ།  
ngag dbang smin grol  
ངག་དབང་སྒྲིན་གྲོ།  
phur ba skyabs ཐུས་མཚོག་ལྷ།  
skal bzang sgrol ma

སྐལ་བཟང་སྒྲོལ་མ།  
tshe dpal mkhar ཆོད་པལ་མཁར།  
yum skyabs rgya ཡུམ་སྐྱབས་རྒྱ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Hainan 海南  
Tanggu 唐谷  
Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措

Qinghai 青海  
Tongde 同德

## YAK LIVES ON THE MOUNTAINS

Bkra shis rab rgyas བཀ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ། (Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰)<sup>1</sup>

6 minutes 59 seconds

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13280854>

Filmed by Bkra shis rab rgyas, 7 July 2024, in Thang skyid Village, 'Ba' dgon Township, Chu dmar leb County, Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, China. This film showcases female and male yaks and their lives in the mountains throughout the four seasons, highlighting the diverse landscape.

### TIBETAN TERMS

'ba' dgon འབའ་དགོན།

bkra shis rab rgyas བཀ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ།

chu dmar leb རྒྱ་དམར་ལེབ།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོ་ན།

yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ།

### CHINESE TERMS

Qinghai 青海

Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰

---

<sup>1</sup> Bkra shis rab rgyas བཀ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ། (Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰). 2025. Yak Lives on the Mountains. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:257.

TIBETAN *SRUNG RTAGS* AND YAK  
PARASITE TREATMENT<sup>1</sup>

Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཐོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)

9 minutes 45 seconds

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11103546>

This film was made in Sha rgya Community, Mgo mang (Guomaying) Township, Mang rdzong (Guinan) County, Mstho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mstho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. I recorded my maternal grandmother (Dkar mo rgyal, b. 1937) and my mother (Rgya kho, b. 1964) making *srung rtags* 'protective clothing labels from wool and cloth' using my iPhone 12 on Friday, March 1, 2024. Grandmother explained that the wool must be greased because grease symbolizes wealth and merit.

We perform the *Srung rtags* ritual once a year in our home in Sha rgya Community, usually on the first, third, or fifteenth days of the Lunar New Year. These days are considered auspicious. The ritual aims to eliminate all distractions and obstacles to complete what is desired as soon as possible.

On the first day, Grandmother and Mother made six *srung rtags* for six different yaks belonging to guardian deities: Dpa' ldan lha mo, Yul lha, A myes dam chen mgar ba nag po, A myes glang chen, A myes rma chen, and Sman chu'i a ma lab sgron ma, which took twenty minutes. Mother mentioned that she did not want to make *srung rtags* for Dpa' ldan lha mo, a female guardian deity, because one yak that had belonged to her had died suddenly. Grandmother believed this was because the deity was unhappy. Grandmother said a *bla ma* said that ten

---

<sup>1</sup> Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཐོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措). 2025. Tibetan *Srung rtags* and Yak Parasite Treatment. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:258-260.

of our yaks died in 2023 because Dpa' ldan lha mo was unhappy, so this year, we needed to offer her more incense to make her happy.

On Saturday, 3 March 2024, Grandmother, Mother, my younger sister (Klu mo mtsho, b. 2006), and I performed the ritual. Mother prepared two scoops of water - one with milk and one without. Water-only was poured over the yaks before tying the *srung rtags* to the yaks' manes. Next, butter was smeared on the horns, forehead, and muzzle. Finally, water with milk was poured over the yaks. If the yaks shook, it indicated that the guardian deities were pleased.

On Monday, 5 March 2024, Mother reported numerous parasites on the yaks' hair, especially on the calves. She had treated the parasites several times in the past month, but they persisted. She then purchased a parasite poison from Mgo mang (Guomaying) Town. It was hard to apply to the yak's skin because of its strong smell, making the yak flee. Consequently, she mixed ash with the poison, reducing the odor. When Mother was younger, her grandmother used ash or rapeseed oil to treat yak parasites, which proved effective. Mother also used rapeseed oil to treat yak parasites, but it was only temporarily effective. I didn't help her much because I was recording, but I gave them oil while they were treating the yaks for parasites.

## TIBETAN TERMS

a myes dam chen mgar ba nag po ཨ་མེས་དམ་ཅན་མག་བ་ནག་པོ།

a myes glang chen ཨ་མེས་གླང་ཅན།

a myes rma chen ཨ་མེས་རྩ་ཅན།

bla ma བླ་མ།

dkar mo rgyal དཀར་མོ་རྒྱལ།

dpa' ldan lha mo དཔལ་ལྷན་ལྷ་མོ།

gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ།

mang zdong མང་རྫོང་།

mgo mang མགོ་མང་།

mstho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།

mstho snon མཚོ་སྒོན།

rgaya kho ལྷོ་ཁོ།

sha rgya ཤ་རྒྱ།

smān chu'i a ma lab sgron ma སྐན་ཅུའི་ཨ་མ་ལ་བསྐྱོན་མ།

srung rtags སྤྱང་རྟགས།

yul lha ཡུལ་ལྷ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Guinan 贵南

Guomaying 过马营

Hainan 海南

Qinghai 青海

## TAYINSUUNI DANGMANI HGAIJA DA QINSANGNI NANTARI<sup>1</sup>

Limusishiden (Li Dechun 李得春), Joint Surgery Department,  
Qinghai University Affiliated Hospital

43 minutes

<https://archive.org/details/tayinsuuni-dangmani-hgaija-da-qinsangni-nantari>

Limusishiden's Mongghul language audio recording is of an article written in the Mongghul language: Limusishiden. 2023. Tayinsuuni Dangmani Hgaija da qinsangniini Nantari. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 63:201-218.

<https://archive.org/details/tayinsuuni-dangmani-hgaija-da-qinsangniini-nantari/page/218/mode/2up>

### GAQANNIINI DOGLA

Tayinsuu (1968 fandi turaja), Mongghul, ghuran bulaini aamana. Ne Dunda Lusni, Kugua Noori Snni, Huzhuu Mongghul Njeena Dolagu Xanni Jughuari Ayilidigu yiringa. Turaji bosa huhuunga; jina ayilini mula surighualira tawun fan pujiu muxija; mulani sghuudi ghadadi kashida aasi dilaja. Zhinyahua (1950 fandi turaja), Tayinsuuni aamana, gan Tayinsuudi ne hgaija suugahgina sanglidi ghuja. Ne pujiura Tayinsuuni kuduguniini guleji, hgaija suuganiini, darang Tayinsuuni aamani aagu lama lasani jiuriwa. Ne 2020 fanni Ghoori Sarani 29di bu Tayinsuuni kuduni xji ganla tangxalaji, ne pujiuni jiuri burawa.

---

<sup>1</sup> Limusishiden (Li Dechun 李得春). 2025. Tayinsuuni Dangmani Hgaija da Qinsngni Nantari. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:261.

## KHRO GRYAL, TIBETAN TRADITIONAL SINGER

Gser mo mtsho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)<sup>1</sup>

12 minutes 37 seconds

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11103263>

I recorded Khro rgyal (b. 1951), my neighbor, from Sha rgya (Shajia) Community, Mgo mang (Guomaying) Township, Mang rdzong (Guinan) County, Mstho Lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mstho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China on Saturday, 30 March 2024, at my home in Sha rgya (Shajia) Community. He sings traditional Tibetan songs exceptionally well. He is the father of fifteen children.

Two of his children passed away in a car accident. Khro rgyal confided that losing his children had diminished his interest in singing. He added that most of the lyrics he once knew had faded from his memory. However, he had an excellent memory in his youth and could remember songs after hearing them only once at weddings.

Khro rgyal is also a skilled herder. His family owns nearly 500 sheep. He counted sheep almost every night, and if a few were missing, he knew the missing ones. He knows every animal in the community and which animals belong to which family, so community members often consult him when they lose livestock.

Khro rgyal remains an active herder and often visits my home, which is a twenty-minute walk from his home, after tending his sheep. My family always welcomes him and prepares food for him.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gser mo mtsho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措). 2025. Khro rgyal, Tibetan Traditional Singer. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:262-263.



## TIBETAN TERMS

khro rgyal ཁྲོ་རྒྱལ།

mang rzung མང་རྩུང་།

mgo mang མགོ་མང་།

mtso lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།

mtso sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།

sha rgya ཤ་རྒྱ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Guinan 贵南

Guomaying 过马营

Hainan 海南

Qinghai 青海

Shajia 沙加

## A TIBETAN DOCTOR COLLECTS MEDICINAL HERBS IN MTSHO LHO, A MDO<sup>1</sup>

Bkra shis rgya mtsho བཀྲ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措)

Photographer, writer, editor: Bkra shis rgya mtsho བཀྲ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

Filmed with an iPhone 12 Pro Max)

Date: Monday, 24 July 2023

20 minutes 23 seconds

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10677031>

This film features a Tibetan local doctor (Lha snang gyal, bl 1970) collecting herbs at 34 °48'6" latitude, 100°40'12" longitude, 4,493 MASL on Ba wo Mountain, Rmog dkar (Muhe) Village, Zhol ma (Xiuma) Town, 'Ba' rdzong (Tongde) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China.

### PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Lha snang gyal was born in Brigade Number Three, Klu lung (Lilun) Village, Thang mgo (Tanggu) Town, 'Ba' rdzong (Tongde) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. After completing local primary school, he spent a couple of years at home assisting his parents in herding livestock.

At eighteen, he began studying *Tibetan Four Medical Tantras* under the guidance of his paternal uncle, Thub bstan dam chos 'od zer (1966-2019), a local scholar-monk. Subsequently, he gained clinical experience for three years at a

---

<sup>1</sup> Bkra shis rgya mtsho བཀྲ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措). 2025. A Tibetan Doctor Collects Medicinal Herbs in Mtsho lho, A mdo. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65: 264-276.

local County Tibetan hospital (Tongde Xian Zang Yiyuan), working alongside Dr. Mkhar 'bum gyal, specializing in ear-related cases.

For an additional two years, he served at the Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Provincial Tibetan Hospital (Qinghai Sheng Zang Yiyuan), collaborating with his paternal uncle, Blo 'ba' (b. 1948), in the Internal Medicine, Surgery, and Infectious Diseases departments.

In 2005, with Blo 'ba', he established a branch of the Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Provincial Tibetan Hospital in 'Ba' thang, his home area, where he worked for three years. Concurrently, he furthered his education, graduating from Chab cha Technical School's Medical Department (Hainan Zhou Zhiye Jishu Xuexiao) in 2009 and Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Provincial Medical University (Qinghai Daxue Yixueyuan) in 2011.

Following academic achievements, he worked for two years at Sde dge zhe chen sman khang kun phan bde skyid gling, also known as Sde dge zhe chen Tibetan Medicine Clinic (Dege Xieqing Lizhong Fule Yiyuan), located in Zhe chen (Xieqing) Monastery, Rdzogs chen (Zuoqin) Township, Sde dge (Dege) County, Dkar mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Si khron (Sichuan) Province.

In 2014, Lha snang gyal successfully passed an examination and obtained the National Doctor Qualification Certificate. In 2015, he acquired a National Medical Practice Certificate. In 2016, he returned to 'Ba' rdzong (Tongde) and established a private clinic - 'Sapphire Tibetan Clinic' (Laroujia Zangyi Zhensuo) - in the local County Town. Afterward, he has been committed to providing quality healthcare services for the community.

## COLLECTING HERBS ON THE MOUNTAIN

This morning, we prepared bread and beverages for lunch. I (b. 1983) joined my brother, Lha snang rgyal; sister-in-law, Nyi ma lha mo (b.1996); and nephew Bsod nams bkra shis (b. 2014). We

traveled 115 kilometers to collect *cochelaria scapiflora*. Unfortunately, we couldn't find this particular herb. Instead, we gathered around twenty kilograms of *lagotis crassifolia* Prain in two plastic bags with two small hoes.

We had come to this area a year earlier and collected herbs near Ra rgya Town. The collection took place on the mountain from 1:10 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., during which we also had lunch.

Upon returning to the foot of the mountain, we washed all the herbs in a stream.

## HERB COLLECTION GUIDELINES

### SELECTING THE DATE

Every year, the first day of herb collection should be chosen based on the Tibetan lunisolar calendar, specifically opting for a day with the "Water-Water combination." This day is auspicious, as the double encounter of water brings together nectar, enhancing life's force.

### SELECTIVE HARVESTING

While collecting herbs, it is essential not to harvest all of certain plants that you locate. You should leave some behind and express a prayer for preserving the plant species. This practice aligns with the principle of ensuring sustainability and addressing the needs of patients suffering from various diseases.

### SPIRITUAL PREPARATION

Before venturing into the field, it is best to invoke the blessings of the Medicine Buddhas by reciting the Medicine Prayer scripture. Face the east and prostrate three times to the east, emphasizing the healing potency of the herbs to address all ailments. Exercise caution in language, avoiding any expressions

that might arouse suspicion, particularly refraining from labeling the herbs poisonous plants.

#### HYGIENIC PRACTICES

After collecting herbs, wash them in local water before bringing them home. This ensures cleanliness and removes impurities adhering to the plants during collection.

#### EXPERIENCES IN COLLECTING MATERIALS

Over the decades of my brother's experience collecting plants, he has observed a decline in the overall plant population, with some species on the brink of extinction in certain areas. The demand of the social market encourages the use of local medicine due to the increasing influx of outsiders engaging in business, impacting the requirements of local doctors and the overall healthcare landscape.

Second, the entire ecosystem is degraded due to land excavation and water and air contamination. Additionally, there have been instances of encountering danger while collecting herbs on mountains and digging soil and stones for medicinal purposes. For instance, in 2017, I (writer) assisted my brother in collecting calcite on a cliff. I narrowly avoided a fall into melting snow on slippery foothills. Another time, while accompanied by two nephews on a foggy summer day in the mountains, we reached the top of the mountain, and I lost sight of my nephews until the fog dissipated later in the evening.

#### PART TWO

This section explores how locals employ their imagery of herbs, associating them with various animals and objects, to describe and identify herbs. I translated these descriptions into English from the local terms. Additionally, photographs depict the process of collecting medicinal materials and highlight instances of treating patients.

## LOCALLY RECOGNIZED HERBS

*Gentinan urnula* H. Smith: Resembles the nine layers of a wheel.  
*Swertia chirayita* Buch. -han: Resembles a raven carrying an arrow.

Black *Pulicaria insignis* Drumm: Similar to a metal smoking pipe.

*Lagotis yunnanensis* W. Smith: Resembles the matted hair of a dog's tail.

*Chrysosplenium carnosum* Hook: Resembling a horse hoof.

*Thlaspi arvense* L: Resembles a small Bon tradition drum.

*Aster himalaicus* Clarke: Resembles a sword-wheel.

*Codonopsis nervosa* Nannf: Like a small metal bell.

*Dracocephalum tanguticum* Maxim: Like a hinny's mane.

*Lagotis brachystachya* Maxim: Similar to a calf tether line in a prosperous household.

*Hypecoum leptocarpum* Hook: Similar to a rich father's daughter.

*Saxifraga melanocentra*: Like broken black barley.

*Lancea tibetica* Hook.F.et Hsuan: Resembles a raven's eye.

*Meconopsis horridula* Hook: Resembles a shameful bride.

*Przewalskia tangutica* Maxim.: Like an old man's scrotum.

*Rhodiola wallichiana*: Resembles a horse's lung.

*Saussurea medusa* Maxim: Similar to a doe's throat.

*Saxifraga umbelluata* Hook: Resembles setting a fire on grassland.

*Pedicularis tubiformis* Tsoong: Resembles a vulture looking backward.

*Capsella bursa-pastoris* Medic: Like a lamb's shoulder blade.

*Thamnolia vermicularia*: Resembles a deer's white antler.

*Lamiophlomis rotata* (Benth.) Kudo: Resembles the skin of an old man's chest.

*Aconitum naviculare* Stapf: Similar to a vulture's curved beak.

*Arenaria kansuensis* Maxim: Resembles the grass in a yak's stomach turned inside out.

*Polygonum macrophyllum* D. Don: Resembles an unsheared male sheep.

*Pulicaria insignis* Drumm: Similar to a tassel on a monk's horse's chest.

*Paeonia tenuifolia* var. *lutea* Marq: Resembles conch earrings.

*Ligularia virgaurea*: Resembles donkey ears.

*Incarvillea compacta* Maxim: Resembles a wolf's nipple.

*Cordyceps*: Resembles a rhinoceros's horn.

ལྷ་བདུད་རྩི་རྩི་ལྷགས་ཀྱི་རིལ་རྩུང་འདྲ།  
གཞུང་རྩི་འཁོར་ལོ་དབྱེ་བཞགས་འདྲ།  
གཡའ་ཀྱི་ཐུན་པོ་རྩི་ཁྱོད་མིག་པ་འདྲ།  
སྒྲ་སྒྲ་(མོན་ལྷ་)དཀར་པོ་ག་གཟན་བལ་ཁུར་འདྲ།  
ཉིག་ཏུ་ནག་པོ་པོ་རྩི་མདའ་ཁུར་འདྲ།  
ཐང་ཁྲིམ་དཀར་པོ་མེ་མེན་རྩིག་པ་འདྲ།  
ཕི་ཡང་གི་ནི་རྩི་རྩི་རྩི་རྩི་མ་འདྲ།  
བལ་ཡག་པ་ནི་པོ་རྩི་མིག་རྩིག་འདྲ།  
བྱ་ཁྱོད་ལྷག་པ་ལྷ་མོའི་མོལ་ཅོག་འདྲ།  
བར་བ་ཏུ་ནི་པ་ལྷགས་བྱ་མོ་འདྲ།  
ཐིག་བའི་ནི་པོ་རྩི་པོའི་རྩི་རྩི་འདྲ།  
བོང་བ་དཀར་པོ་ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་ཡལ་མུ་འདྲ།  
མིང་ཅན་ནག་པོ་ལྷགས་ནག་དུང་ཆག་(ར་ཙོ་)འདྲ།  
མིང་ཅན་མེར་པོ་སྒྲ་མའི་ཐོང་དྲིམ་འདྲ།  
འབྲུ་ཏུ་ས་འཛིན་ལྷགས་པོའི་བེལ་རྩིང་འདྲ།  
འོད་ཐུན་དཀར་པོ་ནས་ནག་ཆག་ཆོ་འདྲ།  
རྒྱལ་བའི་ཐུན་ནི་རལ་མའི་འཁོར་ལོ་འདྲ།  
རྩི་ལྷགས་པ་ནི་མེ་མེན་བྲང་བལས་འདྲ།  
རྩི་དཔྱིད་བམེ་བའི་ར་ཙོ་འདྲ།  
རི་ཤོ་པ་(ཁོ་ཤོག)ནི་ཐོང་བའི་རྩི་མཆོག་འདྲ།  
ཡིག་དུར་རྩི་སྒྲོ་བཅོས་མ་འདྲ།  
ལྷག་ཏུ་མེར་པོ་བྱ་ཁྱོད་ལྱིར་བཞགས་འདྲ།  
ཐང་ཆན་དཀར་པོ་ཤ་ཤ་བའི་དུང་ར་འདྲ།  
སྒོ་ལོ་དཀར་པོ་དུང་མའི་རྩི་རྩིག་འདྲ།  
ལྷམ་ཐུ་ཉིག་ནི་ཐང་ལ་མེ་ཤོར་འདྲ།  
མོག་ཀ་པ་ནི་ལྷག་རྩིང་མོག་པ་འདྲ།  
རྩིང་ལེན་ཐུན་པོ་ཁྱི་ཡི་རྩི་འབྱེད་འདྲ།

ཨ་སྒང་དཀར་པོ་གཡག་གན་སྒོ་(མེ)ཚྭ་ལས་འདྲ།  
ཨ་བྲག་ཚེ་ཐོན་བག་མ་ཚུལ་འདྲག་(ཚུལ་རིས་)འདྲ།  
ལྷག་ཚུལ་སྒོ་དམར་བྱུང་གི་ཁྱ་མ་འདྲ།

### PART THREE: LHA SNANG GYAL'S CLINIC

Lha snang gyal has treated thousands of patients over eight years. His clinic currently houses around seventy types of Tibetan medicine, with approximately forty acquired from Lha sa, Sde dge, Mdzod dge, and other medical factories and hospitals, and he has created around thirty. This collection includes formulations such as Six Pacification, Eight *Gentiana chretta*, Twelve Calcite by Phagmotrupa, twenty-five mulberry formulations, twenty-five bamboo manna, white pills, and more.

The process of collecting herbal materials involves leaves, flowers, seeds, and roots. In summer, he focuses on collecting various plants, including three types of *mecopsis punicea*, blue *meconopsis horridual* Hook, *oxygraphis glacialis*, *aster souliei* Franch, dragonhead, three types of sheep horns, two types of *gentians*, *gentaina decumbens*, *soroseris hookeriana*, snow lotus, *lagotis crassifolia*, and many others. Additionally, herbs with roots, such as *orchis latifolia*, *rheum palmatum*, fritillary bulbs, *Lancea tibetica* Hook, and *miliaris himalaica*, are harvested in autumn and winter.

His clinic also has hundreds of soil and stone medicinal materials, including two types of white stones, snow droplets, calcite, bamboo manna, and others. The inventory extends to Tibetan medicinal materials such as mineral waters, soils, stones, herbs, animals, and animal dung.

A saying suggests that an informed mixing of substances can turn anything into medicine. Moreover, lying on the grassland, a person's body surrounded by grass can purportedly cure a range of illnesses.



## TIBETAN TERMS

baiDUr+ya bod sman khang འི་རྒྱུ་བོད་སྐྱེན་ཁང་།  
bkra shis rgya mtsho བག་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ།  
blo 'ba' ལྷོ་འབའ།  
bsod nams bkra shis བསོད་ནམས་བག་ཤིས།  
dga' rab དགའ་རབ།  
dkar mdzes དཀར་མཛེས།  
lha snang rgyal ལྷ་སྐང་རྒྱལ།  
mkhar 'bum rgyal མཁར་འབུམ་རྒྱལ།  
nyi ma lha mo ཉི་མ་ལྷ་མོ།  
ra rgya ར་རྒྱ།  
rdzogs chen རྫོགས་ཆེན།  
rgyal bo རྒྱལ་བོ།  
sde dge zhe chen sman khang kun phan bde skyid gling  
ཕྱེ་དགེ་ཞེ་ཆེན་སྐྱེན་ཁང་ཀུན་པན་བདེ་སྦྱིད་གླིང་།  
sde dge ཕྱེ་དགེ།  
si khron སི་ཁྲོན།  
thub bstan dam chos 'od zer ཐུབ་བསྟན་དམ་ཚས་འདྲ་ཟེར།

## CHINESE TERMS

Dege 德格  
Dege Xieqing Lizhong Fule Yiyuan 德格协庆利众福乐医院  
Ganzi 甘孜  
Hainan Zhou Zhiye Jishu Xuexiao 海南州职业技术学校  
Hainan 海南  
Laroujia Zangyi Zhensuo 拉肉加藏医诊所  
Lilun 力伦  
Muhe 木合  
Qinghai 青海  
Qinghai Daxue Yixueyuan 青海大学医学院  
Qinghai Sheng Zang Yiyuan 青海省藏医院  
Sichuan 四川  
Tanggu 唐谷  
Tongde Xian Zang Yiyuan 同德县藏医院

Tongde 同德

Xieqing 协庆

Xiuma 秀麻

Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措

Zuoqin 佐钦

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to my friend, Rgyal bo, and the tantric monk, Dga' rab, for their valuable contributions. Heartfelt appreciation to my brother for providing information and explaining the herbs' properties. (Saturday, 17 February 2024)

## DIALOGUE

Oh, A+yon chos sgron.

Sound of a car.

Tragic, look at this, such a bad road, not the road to take. Drive slowly.

It's sure to be a waste.

We probably arrived at that mountain last year.

There aren't many car tracks here.

Sheep bleating.

The sound of chewing gum.

Sheep bleating.

They are gathering here.

Go up and give it to Mother.

Uncle, look down, it's so beautiful.

The sound of footsteps. Have you had lunch? It looks like there's caterpillar fungus around. Quickly eat and go.

Bsod b+ha, Da ran (sound), hum.

Are there 300 sheep? More than 300.

When were we coming here? At 9 a.m.? No, we came here last year, maybe at the same time.

Did we arrive earlier last year?

Are they arriving at the summer pasture at that time? Probably.

Last year was earlier than this year. Did you come here before last year?

Bsod b+ha came here last time, didn't he? I don't remember. Mthu b+ha was sick and we went to collect medicine.

I don't remember.

When we returned, we brought 5 kilograms of milk.

Are you happy to go and collect medicine? Happy but cold. It's okay.

Have you collected herbs before? Tell me all the places you went to.

All the bread is finished. Is it enough?

I don't know, ask Lha Lha.

The sound of small birds.

Oh, why did you come here? I came to collect herbs. Is it hard work? A little bit.

Uncle came here, and the butterflies were fluttering.

The sound of butterfly wings.

What's that? It's wild garlic.

This is wonderful. Pop.

What's that? Came here. I don't know exactly.

Father, what's the name of the flower I'm collecting?

It is *Aster himalaicus* Clarke.

Oh, it's called *Aster himalaicus* Clarke.

Mother said to help her. Lha lha said to help him.

In fact, who am I to help?

Lha lha, where should this be placed? Give it to Mother Nyi ma.

Bsod noms bkra shis, collect all, don't leave any behind.

Oh, Bsod noms bkra shis, there it is.

Now, the bag is really full.

Can you carry it back home? I can't.

Sound of walking.

*Arenaria kansuensis* Maxim resembles the sound of grass in a yak's stomach turning inside out.

Giggle. Resembles the sound of grass in a yak's stomach turning inside.

This is *Saxifraga melanocentra*, resembling broken black barley.  
What is this grass? This is *Saussurea areanaria* Maxim.

*Polygonum macrophyllum* D. Don: Resembles unsheared wool  
on a male sheep.

Is this it? Yes, it is.

This is also called *Polygonum sinomontanum* Sam. It's a lung  
medicinal herb. This is called *Aster himalaicus* Clarke,  
*Aster flaccidus* Bunge, and also lotus.

Here lies a dead insect. Giggle.

Yes, put it in your mouth to check its taste. It's delicious.

*Taraxacum tibetanum* Hand heals wounds and fevers.

Do you know this? *Aconitum naviculare* Stapf heals epidemic  
poison and old fever. Let's go.

Eat it. Giggle, do you like it? Hum.

The sound of a stream.

Children's voices.

ཁ་བད།  
འ་འོ། ལྷོན་ཆོས་སྒྲོན།  
རྒྱངས་འཁོར་སྒོ་རྒྱབ་པའི་སྒྲ།  
མི། ད་འདི་རེད་ཡ། ལམ་རྩོག་འོ། དེ་འགྲོ་ས་ཞིག་མ་རེད། དལ་མ་གྱིས།  
ད་ལན་ཆགས་ཁོ་ཐག་གོ་རེད།  
ན་ནིང་འུ་ཆོ་བུད་སའི་ཁ་གན་ཡིན་ཁ་རེད།  
འདི་ན་རྒྱངས་འཁོར་སོང་ཤལ་མང་པོ་མི་འདུག  
ལྷག་གི་འབའ་སྒྲ།  
ཐང་རྩ་ལྷད་པའི་སྒྲ།  
ཁོ་ཆོས་འདི་ན་འབྲུག་གི་འདུག  
ཡར་ལ་སོང་། ཨ་མ་བྱིན།  
ཨ་མ་ཁྱེས་མར་ལ་སྒྲོས་དང་ད་ཡག་གི་ཡ།  
གོ་སྒྲ། ལྷོན་ཆོས་རྩོས་ར་འཐུང་གོ་ནས། ལྷན་རྩ་ཡོང་ཡོད་ས་ཞིག་རེད།  
རེ་མ་ཐ་དང་ནས་འགྲོ།  
བསོད་ནམས་ལྷོ་རྩན་ཅན་པོ་དེ། ལྷན།  
ལྷག་ཤལ་ཡག་པ་བྱས་ཡོད་ཀྱི་ད། ཤལ་ཡིས་མི་ཆད་ཀྱི།  
འུ་ཆོ་ནམ་ཡོང་ནི་ཡིན་ད། དུས་ཆོད་དུའི་སྒྲོང་ཡོང་ནི་རེད།  
མ་རེད་ན་ནིང་འུ་ཆོ་ཡོང་དུས། བལ་ཆར་ད་ཆོད་ཅིག་ཡིན་རྒྱུ་རེད།  
ན་ནིང་དོ་རྩོག་གི་ཐ་ཡིན་ནི་རེད། འདི་ཆོ་དབྱར་སའི་ནང་ལ་བབས་མེད་ཀྱི་ཡིན། བབས་ཡོད་ན་ཡང་ཐང་གི་  
བབ་འདུག ལྷ་ཡར་ཁ་ན་ཡོད་འོ། དེའི་སྒྲན་ལ་འདིར་འབྲུག་གི་ཡོང་ཨ་མྲོང་། མ་མྲོང་།

བསོད་སྒྲ་ཡང་དེ་དུས་ཡོང་ང་། ཞེ་ཡོང་ང། ཡིད་ལ་མི་ཡོང་གི།  
མཐུ་སྒྲ་ཅིག་ན་ནས་ཉལ་བཟང་ནས་འུ་ཚོ་འཐུ་གི་སོང་ནི་མི་དྲན་གི། མི་ཡོང་གི།  
འོ་མ་རྒྱ་མ་བཟུ་ལུ་མ་ཁྱེར་ནས་ཕྱིར་ལ་སོང་ནོ།  
སྒྲ་འཐུ་གི་སོང་ན་ཞེ་ཞེ་སོ་གི་བསོད་སྒྲ། བསོད་གི་ར་གུང་གི། ཁང་ན་དག་ནི་རེད། དེ་མིན་ཁྱོད་སྒྲ་འཐུ་གི་གང་ལ་སོང་ར། སོང་ས་  
ཚང་མ་ཤོད།  
གོ་རེ་ཉུང་འདུག་ཚར་སོང་ནི་རེད་ནས།  
དེ་ཤེས་ནི་མ་རེད། ལྷ་ལྷ་འདྲི་དགོས་ནི་རེད།  
ཐུའུ་ཡི་སྐད་སྒྲ།  
འ་རོ། ཁྱོད་ཅི་ཐུང་དུ་ཡོང་བ་ཡིན། སྒྲ་འཐུ་གི། སྒྲ་འཐུ་རྒྱ་འདྲི་ཞེ་དཀའ་ཞེ་ཞེ། ལུང་ཅས་དཀའ་ཞེ།  
ཨ་མ་ཐུ་མ་ལེག། ཐུ་མ་ལེག་གི་གཤོག་སྒྲ།  
དེ་ཅི་རེད། རི་སྒྲ།  
འདི་དང་འཇིགས་གི་ཡ།  
ཆེག་ཤོད།  
ཀ་རི་དེ་ཅི་ཞིག་རེད། མི་ཤེས་གི།  
ཨ་མ་པ་ངས་འཐུ་གོ་ནི་མེ་རྟོག་གན་གི་ཕྱིང་ལ་ཅི་ཞིག་ཡིན་ད།  
སྒྲ་འཐུ་ཤེས་གཞིགས་རྟོག་ཅུ་ཟེར་ནི་རེད།  
ཨ། མི་རྟོག་རྟོག་ཅུ་ཟེར་ནི་རེད།  
མི་རྟོག་རྟོག་ཅུ་ཟེར་གི། ཀན་ལོངས་དང་།  
དེ་ཅི་རེད། ལྷ་ལྷ་ས་འུ་ལེན་རྟོགས་ཕྱིས་ཟེར། ཨ་མ་ཉི་མས་ཡང་ང་ལེན་རྟོགས་ཕྱིས་ཟེར།  
དོན་ངོ་མ་ལུང་ལེན་རྟོགས་ཐུང་དགོས་ནི་རེད།  
ལྷ་ལྷ་འདྲི་གང་ལ་འཇོག་སྒྲ། ཨ་མ་ཉི་མ་ཐུན་ཚོངས།  
བསོད་ནམས་བཀྲ་ཤིས་ལེར་བཞིག་ར་མ་སྒྲར་ནས་འཐུས།  
བསོད་ནམས་བཀྲ་ཤིས་དེ་རེད། འ་རོ།  
ད་ངས་ངེ་གང་ཐལ་གོ།  
དེ་ཁྱོས་ཁྱེར་ནས་འཐོ་དགོས་ན་བ་ས་ཞེ་ཡོང་གི། ངས་བ་རྒྱ་མ་རེད་གོ།  
གོ་མ་སྒྲ།  
ཨ་ཀྱོང་དཀར་པོ་གཡག་གན་སྒྲོ་སྒྲོགས་འདྲ། ཉུ་གཡག་གན་སྒྲོ་སྒྲོགས་འདྲ།  
འོད་ཟེན་དཀར་པོ་ནས་ནག་ཆག་ཚོ་འདྲ་འདི་རེད།  
སྒྲ་དེ་ཅི་རེད། ལྷ་ལྷ་ཁྱི་བ་མ་ལ།  
མོན་ལུ་དཀར་པོ་ཤ་གཟན་བལ་ཁྱེར་འདྲ་ཟེར་ནི་རེད།  
འདི་ཡིན་ནི་ཞེ་རེད། ཡིན་ནི་རེད།  
འདི་ཉེ་མིང་ལ་སྒྲ་སྐད་ཡང་ཟེར། སྒྲ་སྒྲ་ཞིག་ཡིན་ནི་རེད།  
འདི་ལ་རྒྱལ་བའི་སྒྲ་ཟེར་ནི་རེད། རྟོག་ཅུ་ཡང་ཟེར་ནི་རེད། ལྷ་ལྷ་ཡང་ཟེར།  
ནང་ན་འཐུ་ཞིག་ཤི་འདུག་དགོང་སྒྲ།  
འོ་ལ། དེ་ལྷར་ཁར་བཞག་ནས་རོ་ཅི་ཡིན་བརྟག་དགོས།  
འདི་ཞིག་གི་ཡ།

ཁུར་མོང་མ་ཡི་ཚ་བ་སེལ་བར་བྱེད་ཟེར། །  
ཨ་ཤེས་ཀྱི་ བོང་ང་དཀར་པོས་རིམས་དྲག་རྩིང་ཚད་སེལ། །  
ད་འགྲོ།  
འདི་ཚོ། ༩་༩། རྩོད་ཟ་རྒྱར་དགའ་ཀ  
ཨ་དགའ། བྱམ།  
ཚུ་ཕན་གྱི་བཞུར་རྒྱ།  
བྱིས་པའི་རྒྱ་དྲ།

## OFFERING ROAST BARLEY FLOUR TO ANTS ON THE MOUNTAIN<sup>1</sup>

Bkra shis rgya mtsho བཀ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措)

3 minutes 51 seconds

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10533954>

Wednesday, 16 August 2023 - 10:25 a.m. to 1:14 p.m.

Filmed with an iPhone 12 Pro Max.

This film highlights a local ritual of offering roast barley flour to ants on the mountain during an annual summer festival in the Sman lung Valley, Shar tshang Village, Rka 'ba' sum mdo Town, 'Ba' rdzong (Tongde) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China.

My nephew (Bsod nams bkra shis, b. 2014) and I (Bkra shis rgya mtsho, b. 1983) participated in this festival in Shar tshang Village. On 15 August 2023 my friend (Rgyal po b. 1973) informed me they were ready. The next day, on August 16 in the early morning, I drove my brother's Forth car to Shar tshang Village around nine a.m. My friend and his grandson (Rdo rje don 'grub, b. 2017) joined us when we reached his home. We spent two hours pouring *rtsam pa* in a nest of ants on the mountain and collecting sea buckthorn. When we returned to the foot of the mountain, the village religious leader, A lag ('Jigs med rgya mtsho, b. 1963), and other participants, who had been waiting, seized the opportunity when the rain stopped to prepare and offer roast barley flour incense, accompanied by chanting rituals and prayers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bkra shis rgya mtsho བཀ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措). 2025. Offering Roast Barley Flour to Ants on the Mountain. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:277-285.

According to Buddhist practitioners, generosity serves two purposes. First, it is directed towards individuals who have embraced bodhicitta. Secondly, according to Buddhist theory, it includes sentient beings in lower realms, such as ants, who endure suffering in the form of an animal body and mental suffering as hungry ghosts. Generous offerings in this context yield significant merit. The ritual holds profound motivation in allowing ants to connect with the Dharma and plant the seeds of enlightenment for their future lives. Additionally, practitioners encompass three types of generosity in this ritual: the generosity of life, the generosity of subsistence, and the generosity of the Dharma.

The ritual aims to facilitate healing and wealth accumulation for individuals with guidance from local diviners. For example, some diviners suggested that their followers do this to overcome misfortune and avoid obstacles in their future lives. Barley flour is finely ground to initiate the ritual, ensuring its purity without animal flesh. The resulting powder should be treated with reverence, like a peaceful Buddha relic pill. This sacred powder, which encompasses the five dharmas of Buddhahood without meditation, seeing, hearing, thinking, touching, and tasting to attain enlightenment and sow the seeds of enlightenment, should not be combined with a wrathful Buddha's pill.

When necessary conditions are met, a monk will lead participants in specific ritual chants and use a sacred conch to summon ants from their nests.

## CONTEXT

This ritual originated in a thousand-year-old tradition documented in Buddhist scriptures, particularly in the renowned work *The Precious Garland* by the Mahayana Buddhist master Nagarjuna (150-250 CED). While not specifically centered on ants, the text mentions providing food to insects and highlights associated merits. From a Buddhist



perspective, offering sustenance to ants is considered exceptionally meritorious because it extends compassion to hungry ghosts who experience great suffering from thirst and hunger. In Buddhist philosophy, the hierarchy of merit is established, with acts of generosity towards ants more extraordinary than similar acts to hungry people, ordinary individuals, monks, or even ant colonies. Following this ancient tradition, the ritual was practiced many years ago by a religious figure who collaborated with local community members in my home community.

## THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION AND MY EXPERIENCES

Throughout history, various scriptures have emphasized the practice of offering roast barley flour to ants. Such texts suggest mixing roast barley powder with a small amount of yak butter, imbuing it with religious sanctity, and sprinkling it on the periphery of an ant's nest. A crucial condition is ensuring there is no rain after scattering the roast barley flour in the ant nest, as rain could prove fatal to the ants.

More recently, some monks mix holy substances with water and add them to watermelon for the ants, believing that these substances can alleviate the suffering of hunger and thirst. However, most locals, including me, continue to adhere to the traditional practice of offering roast barley flour to ants.

My mother (Gangs mtsho skyid, 1950-2018) shared stories of a local holy monk, O'u rgya dge zhe'u rin po che (Thub bstan 'jam dbyangs dge legs dpal bzang, 1917-1959), who, each summer before the Culture Revolution (1966-1976), performed this ritual in the local community. In the autumn of 2018, my friend 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen rab (b. 1982, a monk) and my older brother (Lha snang rgyal, b. 1979) dedicated a day to offering *rtsam pa* to ants on the mountain on my friend's family winter pasture.

This marks my second time to participate in this ritual.

SUNDAY, 20 AUGUST 2023 - 12:31 a.m.-3:12 p.m.

I set off to offer roast barley flour to ants on the mountain with my friends, 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen rab (b. 1982), 'Jigs med shes rab (b. 1983), and Gro'u pe (b. 1952).

After planning a few days earlier, we selected a date with clear weather, ensuring no rain. Each of us contributed fifty RMB, to purchase ten kilograms of roast barley flour in plastic bags. Additionally, we bought drinks, watermelons, a bottle of yogurt, and fruit from a County Town shop for our lunch and fuel for the car. The day before our journey, I assisted Zhu bae in crushing religious substances with a mortar and pestle, combining them with sugar, and mixing it all with the roast barley flour.

Our destination was one hundred kilometers away in Brag ser Valley, Thar shul Village, Thar shul Town, Mang rdzong (Guinan) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China, where we aimed to find numerous ant nests.

We arrived near She'u lung sman zhing Valley, offered incense and roast barley flour, and had lunch there.

## TIBETAN TERMS

'ba' rdzong འབའ་རྫོང་།

'jam dbyangs mkhyen rab འཇམ་དབྱངས་མཁྱེན་རབ།

'jigs med shes rab འཇིགས་མེད་ཤེས་རབ།

a lag 'jigs med rgya mtsho ཨ་ལག་འཇིགས་མེད་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

bkra shis rgya mtsho བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

brag ser བརྒ་སེར།

bsod nams bkra shis བསོད་ནམས་བརྒ་ཤིས།

gangs mtsho skyid གངས་མཚོ་སྐྱིད།

gro'u pe གྲོ་ཡེ།

lha snang rgyal ལྷ་སྣང་རྒྱལ།

mang rdzong མང་རྫོང་།

mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།

o'u rgya dge zhe'u rin po che ཨ་ལྷ་རྒྱ་དགེ་ལེན་པོ་ཆེ།  
rdo rje don 'grub རྡོ་རྗེ་དོན་འབྲུག།  
rgyal po རྒྱལ་པོ།  
rka 'ba' sum mdo ཀ་འབའ་སུམ་མདོ།  
rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།  
shar tshang ཤར་ཚང་།  
she'u lung sman zhing ཤེལ་ལུང་སྐྱམ་ཞིང་།  
sman lung སྐྱམ་ལུང་།  
thar shul ཐར་ཤུ།  
thub bstan 'jam dbyangs dge legs dpal bzang  
ཐུབ་བསྐྱེན་འཇམ་དབྱངས་དགེ་ལགས་དཔལ་བཟང་།

## CHINESE TERMS

Guinan 贵南

Qinghai 青海

Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措

Hainan 海南

Tongde 同德

## SCRIPT

Children while walking.

We are here to climb.

A conch.

The *rtsam pa* is already poured here.

Is there poured *rtsam pa*?

Reciting the mantras of the unshakable Buddha and the  
compassionate Buddha.

Approaching autumn, the ants are born with wings.

Reciting " *oM ma Ni pad+me hU~M.*"

Go, brother.

Sea buckthorn has various qualities.

The ant is good.

Reciting the mantras of the unshakable Buddha and the  
compassionate Buddha.

After growing up, pour his way.

Yes.

Do you understand? Yes.

We shouted, and many ants came.

Poured around the edge of the ant nest.

Don't pour too much.

Don't scatter on the top of the nest; scatter here.

How many ants are here?

A conch.

One *bla ma* said, "Watermelon is good." But our *bla ma* said,

"*Rtsam pa* is good." Anyway, people said, their own *bla ma* is a flower, and their *bla ma* is grass.

Children imitate the conch sound.

How many ant nests did we scatter around?

We should count them.

Wow, I make the conch sound.

There is a huge black bee.

Oh.

Our community went to offer incense on the black rocky mountain.

Oh, if someone needs more *rtsam pa*, come and I will give you.

What would you like?

Do you drink Pepsi?

A conch.

Pour *rtsam pa* this way.

Chanting the compassionate Buddha's mantra.

Are you here to feed the ants today?

Yes.

How many nests did you offer to?

Twenty or thirty.

To collect sea buckthorn.

Sea buckthorn covered everywhere.

Cannot root up the sea buckthorn.

Are there a lot of people?

About how many people are there?

Probably over a hundred.

Are your tribe's annual activities like this?

Yes,

The sea buckthorn is not white yet.  
Don't say white, I should say red. (Laughter)  
Pray for merit to reach the hungry ghosts and those suffering  
from hunger and thirst.  
May all beings from whom we have taken life for their blood  
and meat be reborn in the pure land through the power  
of the compassionate Buddha's mantra  
Pray for all beings not to suffer from generation to generation.  
Flowers bloom there.  
Did you get cold?  
No.  
Let's go.  
Footsteps.  
Chorus of the compassionate Buddha's mantra.  
Put it there. Don't scatter garbage, take it back.  
Cars.  
Ringing bell.  
The spiritual song of the compassionate Buddha's mantra.

ཁ་བད།  
བྱིས་པའི་རྟོག་སྒྲ།  
དྲང་སྒྲ།  
འདི་ནས་བྱུན་ལ་འགོ།  
གཏུལ་བཞག་ཡོད་ཀྱི།  
དེའི་ནང་ལ་གཏུལ་ཏེ་ཡོད་ཀྱི།  
ཀན་ནང་ལ་གཏུལ་ཏེ་ཡོད་ཀྱི།  
མི་འབྲིགས་པ་དང་བྱུན་རིས་གཟིགས་ཀྱི་གཟུངས་ཟུགས་འདོན་པ།  
སྟོན་ཁ་ཐོན་ནས་ཤོག་མར་གཤོག་པ་ཐོགས་འདུག།  
མ་ཉི་ཐོན།  
འགོ་ཕུ་བོ།  
སྐར་བུ་ལ་བཟང་ངན་ཡོད་ཀྱི།  
ཤོག་མ་ཟེར་བ་དེ་མ་འདྲ་བ་ཡིན་ནི་རེད།  
མི་འབྲིགས་པ་དང་བྱུན་རིས་གཟིགས་ཀྱི་གཟུངས་ཟུགས་འདོན་པ།  
མ་ཉི་མགུར་དབྱངས།  
གཞུག་ནས་བྱིད་གཉིས་ཡོང་ན་འདི་བཞིན་གཏུལ་དགོས་ནི་རེད་ཀྱི།  
འོ་ཡ།

ནར་སོན་རྗེས། ཨེ་གོ་བྲལ།

གྲོ.ཐལ།

འུར་བརྒྱུག་ན་གྲོག་མ་ཐེ་མང་ལ་བྱད་འགོ་གི

མཐའ་ཁར་གཏོང་།

མང་པོ་མ་གཏུལ།

མགོར་མ་གཏུལ། འདི་ཀར་གཏོལ།

འདི་ན་གྲོག་མ་ཅི་ཅམ་ཡོད་ན།

53.....

ཁུ་གུ་བ་ཟས་ན་བཟང་ཟེར་གི་དོ་སྤྱུལ་ཆང་གིས།

མཁན་པོ་ཚུལ་བྱིམས་རྒྱ་མཆོ་ཚང་གིས་རྒྱ་ཁྱབ་མི་བཟང་ཟེར།

གཞན་གྱི་སྤྱི་མཆོག་དང་རང་གི་སྤྱི་མ་ལྷན་སྤྱོད་ཟེར་ནི་རེད།

53.....

གྲོག་ཆང་དུ་ལ་སྒྱུན་པ་བཏང་སོང་།

ཁ་གྲངས་ལེན་དགོས།

པ་ལོ་གྲགས་སྒྱིན། བ་ངས་དྲུག་བེར་རྒྱ་ཡིན།

དེ་ན་སྒྲུང་མ་ནག་པོ་ཞིག་ཡོད་ཀྱི། ༥༥།

མགོན་པོ་བྲག་ནག་ལ་བསང་གཏོང་གི་སྤང་ནས་ངེད་ཚོ།

ཨ་རིགས་ཚོ། ཅུམ་པ་ཚར་སོང་ནི་ཡོད་ན་ཤོག་ར། སྟེར་ཡ།

ཁྱ་ནག་ཁྱོས་བབྱང་ནས་ཐོད། གང་འཕྱང་བསམ་ན་འཕྱང་།

དུང་འབྱུང་པ།

འདི་ལྟར་ལྷག་དགོས། མ་ཅི་འདོན་པ།

གྲོག་ཕྱིན་གཏོང་གི་ཡོང་ནས། གྲོག་ཚང་དེའི་ནང་ལ་སྤྱུགས་དང་།

ཉི་ཤུ་སྐུ་ཅུ་ཞིག་ཡིན། ལྷ་ར་བྱ་བྱས་ཡ། ད་ལྷ་ར་བྱ་བྱས་

སྟར་བུ་རྟོག་གོ་དམར་ནག་ཞིག་རེད།

སྟར་ཆེར་བཏོག་མི་ཉན།

དེ་རིང་བྲོག་སྒྱུན་གཏོང་ནི་ཨེ་མང་གི།

མང་གི། སལ་ཆེར་མི་ཅི་ཙམ་ཡོད་ལ།

ཕལ་ཆེར་མི་བསྐྱེད་ཡར་ནང་ན་ཡོད་ཀྱི་རེད་པ།

ཁྱེད་ཚོའི་ལ་རེ་རེ་བཏང་ནི་ཨེ་ཡིན།

འོ་ཡ།

ལྷུང་ཕྱུང་དྲུང་དཀར་པོའི་ཅིག་སྤང་མེད་ཀྱི། དམར་པོ་མ་མེད་ནས། དཀར་པོ་རྩྭ་གོ། དགོང་མ།

བསེ་རག་ཡི་དྲགས་བཀའ་སྒྲོམ་མུང་གི་ཡོད་ནི་དག་གི་དགོ་ཅུ་ཆེན་པོ་ཞིག་ཐོབ་ནས་སྒྲོམ་ལམ།

ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ།

གཤམ་ཟུག་པའི་དྲུང་འཕྲོ་མ་ལུས་པ། གཞུང་ཡི་གེ་དྲུག་མའི་ཁྱིན་རྒྱབས་གྱིས། རིང་བདེ་བ་ཅན་དྲ་སྟེ་བར་ཤོག

སྐྱེ་བ་ནས་སྐྱེ་བ། ཆོ་རབས་ནས་ཆོ་རབས་ཐམས་ཅད་དྲ་རྒྱུ་སྤྱིན་ཞིག་མི་སྤྱིང་ནས་སྤྱིན་ལམ།

མེ་ཏོག་ཁ་གཏང་དུས་ད་ལྟོང་བསྟན་ཡོད་ནི་རེད།

ཨ་གང་ཐལ། འུན། མ་གང་ཐལ།  
འུ་གཉིས་ཀ་འགོ།  
དོག་སྒྲ།  
སྤྱན་རིས་གཟིགས་ཀྱི་གཟུངས་བགང་བ།  
དེ་མངས་ནས་པར་འཕེན་རོགས།  
གད་སྟོགས་མ་འཕེན་ཕྱིར་ལ་ཁྱེར་སོང་།  
མངས་འཁོར་གྱི་སྒྲ།  
འི་ལ་བྱ་དཀོལ་བའི་སྒྲ།

SHEEP SHEARING 2023 IN RGYAB LUNG  
(JIALONG) COMMUNITY, RTA NAG MA  
(HEIMAHE) TOWNSHIP TOWN, GSER CHEN  
(GONGHE) COUNTY, MTSO LHO (HAINAN)  
TIBETAN AUTONOMOUS PREFECTURE,  
MTSHO SNGON (QINGHAI)  
PROVINCE, PR CHINA<sup>1</sup>

Sgrol ma yag ལྷོ་མ་ཡག། (Zhuo ma you 卓玛优)

11 minutes

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10130698>

May-June is sheep-shearing time in my home area of Rgyab lung (Jialong) Community, Rta nag ma (Heimahe) Township Town, Gser chen (Gonghe) County,<sup>2</sup> Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. My family stopped shearing sheep in about 2007. I filmed

---

<sup>1</sup> Sgrol ma yag ལྷོ་མ་ཡག། 2025. Sheep Shearing 2023 in Rgyab lung (Jialong) Community, Rta nag ma (Heimahe) Township Town, Gser chen (Gonghe) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:286-290.

<sup>2</sup> In 2021, Gser chen County included seven towns, four townships, ninety-nine administrative communities, and a total population of 133,409. The county had twenty-two ethnic minorities (seventy percent of the total population) including Tibetans, Hui (8,844), and Mongolians (2,140). Han numbered 34,364. The county had 18,761,600 *mu* of usable grassland, 457,600 *mu* of arable land, and an average altitude of 3,200 <https://bit.ly/3Gw2RfS> 20 November 2022). Heimahe's (township town) population was 4,000 with Tibetans accounting for ninety percent of the total. The township town is 1,000 square kilometers in area with jurisdiction over Rgyab lung (Jialong), Brag mchog (Zhiheqv), Bum pa (Wenba), and Ra 'khyog (Ranheqv) <https://bit.ly/3GuaDXK> 20 November 2022). The 2011 population of Mtsho lho Prefecture was 437,800, including 269,100 Tibetans (sixty-three percent, <https://bit.ly/2OAGwll> 25 July 2020).



the first time I participated in sheep shearing since then, helping five local families shear sheep. There have been many changes in sheep-shearing, including what families do with the sheared wool and shearing tools. Most families have around ten helpers.

Father (b. 1970) said that if we don't shear at this time, the sheep will be uncomfortable, scratch against walls, rocks, and ditches, roll over, be unable to stand, and die.

At around five p.m., my cousin's family arrived with their sheep, brought from the summer pasture to the spring pasture. After the family drove the sheep into the sheep enclosure, the son slaughtered a sheep, and his parents went to the township town by motorcycle and bought various beverages, fruit, biscuits, and other items. Father helped the son take care of the meat.

Early the next morning, after a simple breakfast, the family got up at four and began shearing. Later, helpers came one after another.

Before shearing, men sharpen the *bal he* 'shears', and two or three family women prepare milk tea and cook meat and noodles. Each man has ten *bkyig tigs* 'strings', indicating each is to catch ten sheep and shear them. This is *bkyigs thabs gcig* 'one round'. If it is a shearer's first time to shear, other men help him.

When I was a child, each man had his own strings, and most were made of wool. They colored their strings to differentiate them from others. Father's strings were wool and colored red on top. Every time he finished shearing, I was responsible for collecting the strings. At that time, men twisted their strings around their waists and pulled one when they caught a sheep and tied its legs.

Most men who participated in the sheep shearing this year had few wool strings. Instead, they bought cloth from the market and tore it into strips.

During shearing, two or three women were responsible for marking the sheared sheep with *lcags rtsi* 'paint'. Each family had a distinctive paint color and marked the sheep differently. For instance, the first family I helped used green on the neck and blue on the rump. Other women or children were

responsible for collecting *bal rdul* 'pieces of wool that had broken off during shearing'. When I was a child, we were responsible for collecting *bal rdul* and preventing the sheep from escaping as elders were catching them. I did the same during the sheep shearing this year.

After one round finished, the men collected their strings and took a short break. Some resharpened their scissors, and the family offered beverages and snacks.

An element of fun in sheep shearing is young men competing to see who is the fastest. They joke with each other. One of my cousins was the funniest person that day. He teased young men that they would not find good wives if they didn't shear the wool well. The young men also verbally sparred with each other. One of my cousins and his friend had a contest of to see who could shear the fastest. My cousin lost several times, so his friends and cousins teased him that he might not find a good wife. They also teasingly suggested that he join more sheep shearing events to practice his ability.

Father said that when he was young, they were happy to join the sheep-shearing events of local families. Once, one of his cousins and he participated in sheep shearing. There were many young men there to help the family, and they competed to see who was the fastest. Father laughingly said that one young man had sheared the edge of his robe that day. Everybody laughed at him and teased him that day. Jokes and laughing release tiredness.

Some families medicate the sheep during the shearing because they won't have to catch them again with a few family members. For instance, one family brought anthrax vaccine provided by the local government.

One family traditionally takes care of the wool. Women scatter the sheared wool on the ground in a line near the sheep enclosure and spread other wool on the scattered wool. A woman puts a stick on the scattered wool and twists it. Another woman helps her twist the scattered wool. After twisting it tightly, they make a line of twisted wool into a round shape.

Two or three women spin several pieces of wool to make long strips men use to bind the *bal dos* 'rounded wool' with a *yog thag* 'spun strip'. This final process is locally called *bal gcu sdom byed pa*. Men put the *bal dos* in the family's storage room.

Very few families take care of the wool in traditional ways. The shorn wool is placed into plastic bags, which does not involve arduous labor, such as the last family event I joined. They made long strips, scattered the wool on the ground, and so forth.

Finally, the family offers water for the men to wash their hands. The housewife and the husband or other family members ask others to sit. They offer tea, meat, noodles, bread, snacks, and various beverages, repeatedly urging guests and helpers to eat and drink more. If some are unfamiliar with the guests, they do not eat much, pretending they are full after a small amount of food.

I did the same in one family where I met some guests for the first time. The family leader is a relative of my father and has no son. He is in his seventies, so my Father helps him yearly during their sheep-shearing.

This was my first time participating in this family's sheep-shearing. The day before the shearing, the family head phoned Father and asked if he could help. He said it was fine if he could not because of Father's back pain. Father said he would help and would bring me with him. The man was grateful for Father's generous help.

Father is famous for his sheep-shearing ability. Locals said Father was the best shearer in our community when he was young.

Except for the last family, Father didn't join the sheep-shearing of the other families that I joined. Many helpers said it was fine that he did not help because they knew about his back pain. Some helpers said that the work would be easier if Father were there.

Father said sheep-shearing took place in the summer pasture when he was younger because there were few families, few livestock, enough grass for the animals, and locals moved to

the summer pasture earlier. So, they packed the *bal dos* on yaks to the spring pasture where they could store the *bal dos* as long as they wanted.

## TIBETAN TERMS

bal dos བལ་དོས།

bal gcu sdom byed pa བལ་གཅུ་སྡོམ་བྱེད་པ།

bal he བལ་ཧེ།

bal rdul བལ་རུལ།

bkyig thag བརྟིག་ཐག།

bkyigs thabs gcig བརྟིགས་ཐབས་གཅིག།

gser chen གསེར་ཆེན།

lcags rtsi ལྷགས་རྩི།

mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།

rgyab lung རྒྱལ་ལུང་།

rta nag ma ཏ་ནག་མ།

sgrol ma yag སྒྲལ་མ་ཡག།

yog thag ཡོག་ཐག།

## CHINESE TERMS

Jialong 加隆

Heimahe 黑马河

Hainan 海南

Gonghe 共和

## A MDO TIBETAN MILKING, CHURNING BUTTER, AND WEAVING<sup>1</sup>

Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཐོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)

15 minutes 38 seconds

[https://archive.org/details/karens-film-3\\_202311](https://archive.org/details/karens-film-3_202311)

On Friday, 1 September 2023, I used an iPhone 12 Pro Max to capture footage of my mother, Rgya kho (b. 1964), milking, churning butter, washing wool, and weaving at our home in Sha rgya Community, Mgo mang (Guomaying) Township, Mang rdzong (Guinan) County, Mstho Lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mstho snon (Qinghai) Province, PR China.

Rgya kho is a single mother of four daughters. She lived with her grandmother until her passing. Afterward, she lived with her mother. Her education was cut short in the second grade by her grandmother, who believed girls should stay at home to care for the elderly, give birth, and raise children. This idea also applied to my two older sisters. Nevertheless, my mother has not forgotten the Tibetan alphabet taught by her teacher and is currently self-learning Tibetan to read textbooks and WeChat messages.

My mother and I have breakfast at eight a.m. and begin milking our seven female yaks at eight-thirty, which takes about thirty minutes. On the day I recorded, it took forty minutes due to rainy weather.

My mother prefers the traditional method of churning butter, citing the time-saving benefits, as she does not need to churn it daily. In summer, she churns butter once every three days and once a week in autumn and winter. Despite suggestions

---

<sup>1</sup> Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཐོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措). 2025. A mdo mdo Tibetan Milking, Churning Butter, and Weaving. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:291-292.

from villagers to switch to a machine churn, she continues with the traditional method, valuing the superior taste and health benefits of handmade butter. It takes at least two hours to churn butter the old-fashioned way. My mother begins churning at one p.m. and continues until three p.m. My sister-in-law and I assisted her, which is not in the film. I eagerly anticipated these days in my childhood, as Mother would share butter balls, my favorite, with me and the neighboring children, to our delight.

Mother wove only during my primary school years. During that period, women from our neighborhood collaborated to weave and create black tent material. However, with the contemporary preference for white tents due to convenience and warmth, I haven't seen Mother weaving since I started high school. Recently, when I asked for a handmade bag, Mother agreed to make one for me, which I videoed.

## TIBETAN TERMS

gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ།

mang zdong མང་རྫོང་།

mgo mang མགོ་མང་།

mstho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།

mstho snon མཚོ་སྐྱོད།

rgaya kho རྒྱལ་ཁོ།

sha rgya ཤ་རྒྱ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Guinan 贵南

Guomaying 过马营

Hainan 海南

Qinghai 青海

## GRANDMA'S (DKAR MO RGYAL, B. 1937) TIBETAN SNUFF<sup>1</sup>

Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)

8 minutes 54 seconds

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15128342>

I used an iPhone 12 on Sunday, 2 February 2025, to record my maternal grandmother (Dkar mo rgyal, b. 1937) in Sha rgya Community, Mgo mang (Guomaying) Township, Mang rdzong (Guinan) County, Mstho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mstho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China, as she made snuff.

My grandmother began taking snuff when she was around twenty. She and my mom (Rgya kho, b. 1964) are snuff addicts. No matter how busy they are, they find time for snuff, which they take before breakfast. My younger sister (Klum mo mtsho, b. 2006) often complains about this. They take snuff wherever they go, just as modern youth always use their mobile phones.

Three stores sell snuff in our county town, but they don't specialize in it. One sells children's clothes, another sells prayer flags, and the third is a private Tibetan medicine hospital.

A pack of snuff cost twenty RMB in 2025. It cost five RMB when I was in primary school.

One day last year, my grandma asked me to buy snuff. Unfortunately, the county stores had no snuff in stock that day. A middle-aged woman who owned the store said few people buy snuff today.

My mother bought snuff in Xining City. I don't know where else she bought it. The owner of another store in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措). 2025. Grandma's (Dkar mo rgyal, b. 1937) Tibetan Snuff. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:293-294.

county town said they occasionally had snuff, but they were out of stock when I asked. They added that they would have some in a few days.

After I returned home, I told Grandmother what they said. She worried they wouldn't be able to get snuff in the future. She said, "What if there is no snuff left?"

When their snuff was running out, my mother went to town and bought at least five packages each time.

I wanted to record Grandmother making snuff after I read an article about Fentanyl by an author who interviewed three Fentanyl addicts. Even though my grandmother and mom say snuff is beneficial, there are also negatives, such as their poor sense of smell. For example, one day, I heard my sister complaining that my mother and grandma were smoking snuff.

She said, "I asked you to take less snuff. You won't be able to smell spoiled food."

That day, Sister smelled a foul odor and found a piece of spoiled bread. Grandma and Mom didn't smell it. Also, during this winter vacation, I bought perfume and asked my mom, "Does it smell nice?"

She smiled and said, "I can't smell it."

## TIBETAN TERMS

dkar mo rgyal དཀར་མོ་རྒྱལ།  
gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ།  
klum mo mtsho ལུ་མོ་མཚོ།  
mang zdong མང་རྫོང་།  
mgo mang མགོ་མང་།  
mstho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།  
mstho snon མཚོ་སྐྱོན།  
rgaya kho རྒྱལ་ཁོ།  
sha rgya ཤ་རྒྱལ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Guinan 贵南  
Guoma Ying 过马营  
Hainan 海南  
Qinghai 青海



## MOM'S TIBETAN CAKES – HOMEMADE DELIGHTS<sup>1</sup>

Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)

5 minutes 40 seconds

<https://zenodo.org/records/15128324>

On Wednesday, 12 February 2025, I recorded my mother (Rgya kho, b. 1964) in Sha rgya Community, Mgo mang (Guomaying) Township, Mang rdzong (Guinan) County, Mstho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mstho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China, making Tibetan cakes. I used an iPhone 12 to film.

As the Tibetan New Year (Lo sar) approaches, local women busily make small Tibetan cakes as gifts for guests. Since childhood, I vividly remember my mother making Tibetan cakes and helping neighbors with the task. Around Lo sar, all the local women make bread and Tibetan cakes. They always cooperate and assist one another, which is a heartwarming tradition.

However, in recent years, my neighbors have started to buy bread and Tibetan cakes from the township town. They consider this to be more convenient. One kilogram of wild yams cost eighty-five RMB in 2025. Combined with other ingredients, the cost is almost the same as purchasing finished products from the store. So, in terms of price, making them at home and buying them is comparable.

My mother mentioned that when she mashed wild yams and cheese in the past, she used a stone mill. The stone mill was inconvenient, and the mashed wild yams didn't turn out well. Although my mother makes Tibetan cakes almost yearly, I had never paid much attention to the process. These traditional foods

---

<sup>1</sup> Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ། (Saimaocuo 赛毛措). 2025. Mom's Tibetan Cakes – Homemade Delights. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:295-296.

and practices are significant, so I asked my mother to show me how to make Tibetan cakes.

## TIBETAN TERMS

gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ།

mang zdong མང་རྫོང་།

mgo mang མགོ་མང་།

mstho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།

mstho snon མཚོ་སྟན།

rgaya kho རྒྱལ་ཁོ།

sha rgya ཤ་རྒྱ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Guinan 贵南

Guomaying 过马营

Hainan 海南

Qinghai 青海

## THE FIRST DAY OF THE TIBETAN NEW YEAR (2025): MTSHAMS THOG GONG MA MONASTERY<sup>1</sup>

Sngags sa khon thar rgyal སྒགས་ས་ཁོན་ཐར་རྒྱལ།  
(Ehesa Kantaijia 俄合萨侃太加)

6 minutes 59 seconds

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15042927>

Camera: iPhone12

Date: 29 January 2025

Mtshams thog gong ma Monastery, where I made this film, is located in Nyig ldang (Niudang) Community, 'Brong thu (Zhongtie) Township, Brag dkar (Xinghai) County, Mstho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China.

My family got up at five a.m. on the first day of Tibetan Lo sar (the first day of the first Tibetan lunar month). The men in my family prepared to visit the *bla ma* and monks in Mtshams thog gong ma Monastery.

After my mother prepared *bsang* 'incense offerings', the men performed a fire offering. My father and I chanted an offering scripture.

Meanwhile, my mother made breakfast of barley flour and milk tea, which we had together.

My father, my two brothers, and I then went to the monastery by car wearing our Tibetan robes. We needed to arrive early because of Zhal gser, which was held before nine a.m.

We left the car in the monastery parking lot.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sngags sa khon thar rgyal སྒགས་ས་ཁོན་ཐར་རྒྱལ། (Ehesa Kantaijia 俄合萨侃太加). 2025. The First Day of the Tibetan New Year (2025): Mtshams thog gong ma Monastery. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:297-300.

Conversation One:

Monks: There are visitors.

Skal bzang: I will wait for you, brother.

My brother (Dpa' rgyal): OK.

Yum skaybs: Haha... he said OK.

Dpa' rgyal: I just saw someone pinned to the ground by monks,  
and it disappointed me. I thought it was not you. Haha...

Mtshan bzang: What an intense day!

Monks: Come here. Take the bag of barley flour.

Mtshan bzang: Did you get the bag of barley flour?

Lha brtan: Yes, but they took it back. If we try here, we will  
definitely get it.

Conversation Two:

Monks: Let me try. Give me one bag.

Monk: Thank you all very much. Longlife. Thanks. Bkra shis  
bde legs!

Conversation Three:

Monks: This is very good for you. I wish you become wealthy,  
haha....

Monk: Really good.

Monk: May you live to be 108 years old. Longlife.

Monk: Thanks.

Monks: Let's go.

Dialogue Four:

Child: Wow, they're coming. Dad, let me go.

Monks: Happy New Year.

Visitors: Happy New Year.

Monks: Rub, rub more.

Monks: It's enough. Stop.

Monks: Everybody, come here. Rub more.

Dialogue Five:

Monks and visitors: Come on, come on...

Dialogue Six:

Monk: Get the bag of barley flour back. Grab your own bag.

Monks: Have you got the bag of barley flour

Monk: Yes, I got it.

Father: Hi. Should we go back?

Me: Wait a moment.

Dialogue Seven:

Me: Wow! Too much gold.

On this day, as long as there are no life-threatening problems like disease in the village, the New Year is celebrated. Monks rub guests' faces with barley flour in a ritual called Zhal gser 'bul ba 'face painted with gold'. It is only held once a year on this morning. Villagers consider the 'gold' of this day to be very precious. It gives confidence and belief to overcome setbacks and live a happy life. Visitors can also grab *rtsam khug* 'barley flour bags' from monks and keep the flour inside. The bag can also be used to contain incense offering materials. The barley flour is spread on *lhas ra* 'livestock areas' to suppress livestock illness.

People use *rtsam pa* partly because of its white color. The main monastery's sacred mage is Thug rje chen po 'Avalokiteshvara', who has fair skin. *Rtsam pa*'s color is the same as Thug rje chen po, so people believe *rtsam pa* can help them have a happy life, similar to a ritual in which people paint the Buddha gold in Lha sa. The ritual suggests auspiciousness and perfection.

## TIBETAN TERMS

bkra shis bde legs བག་ཤེས་བདེ་ལེགས། Good luck!

bla ma ལྷ་མ། spiritual teacher

bsang བསང་། incense offerings

gser གཞིར། gold, symbolized by rtsam pa 'roasted barley flour'

lhas ra ལྷ་ས་ར། livestock areas

lo sar ལོ་སར། Tibetan New Year, the first day of the first Tibetan  
lunar month

lo sar bzang ལོ་སར་བཟང་། Happy New Year

mtshams thog gong ma མཚམས་ཐོག་གོང་མ། མཚམས་ཐོག་གོང་མའམ་བག་ཤེས་ཚོས་རྫོང་དགེ་འཕེལ་བྱང་  
ཆུབ་ཐྱིང་། Upper Anchorite Monastery is in Nyig ldang  
Community, Brag dkar County, Mtsho lhu Tibetan  
Autonomous Prefecture, Mstho sngon Province, China.  
Mtshams thog gong ma was built on Lha ri zhal dkar  
Mountain and is known as Bkra shis chos rzdong dge 'pel  
byang chub gling. It was founded by Snags sa dge bshes  
'jam dbyang don yod in 1912.

nyig ldang ཉིག་ལྡང་། The Tibetan village where the film was made.

rtsam khug རྩམ་ཁུག་། barley flour bag

rtsam pa རྩམ་པ། roasted barley flour

sku tshe ring སྐུ་ཙེ་རིང་། longlife

thug rje chen po ཐུག་རྗེ་ཆེན་པོ། Lord of Great Compassion  
(Avalokiteshvara), with 1,000 hands and eyes, and fair  
skin

zhal gser 'bul ba ཞལ་གཞིར་འབྲུལ་བ། face painted with gold

## CHINESE TERMS

Ehesa Kantaijia 俄合萨侃太加

Hainan 海南

Niudang 牛当

Qinghai 青海

Xinghai 兴海

Zhongtie 中铁

YAK PARASITE INJECTABLES: BDE SKYID (XINGFU),  
MGO MANG (GUOMAYING) TOWNSHIP, MANG  
RDZONG (GUINAN) COUNTY, MSTHO LHO (HAINAN)  
TIBETAN AUTONOMOUS PREFECTURE, MSTHO  
SNGON (QINGHAI) PROVINCE, PR CHINA<sup>1</sup>  
Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཐོ་ (Saimaocuo 赛毛措)

6 minutes 35 seconds

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11103648>

On Tuesday, 24 March 2024, I visited my older sister's home in Bde skyid (Xingfu), Mgo mang (Guomaying) Township, Mang rdzong (Guinan) County, Mstho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mstho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China, which required approximately thirty-five minutes from my home by private car. My sister, Ma rdo (b. 1984), married Rta lo rgyal (b. 1978) when she was seventeen in an arranged marriage. They have two daughters and a son.

Rta lo rgyal informed me that he administered medication to the yaks to treat parasites, but the parasites returned in a week. Recently, a veterinarian informed him about anti-parasite injectables that offered three months of protection. Thus, he planned to go to town the next day to obtain the injectables.

Sister and I led the yaks into an enclosure on government-owned land. The government allows herders to graze their livestock on this land after harvest. Most herders use this land because they can do so without paying, but only in winter and early autumn. The land is a fifteen-minute walk from their homes.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཐོ་ (Saimaocuo 赛毛措). 2025. Yak Parasite Injectables: Bde skyid (Xingfu), Mgo mang (Guomaying) Township, Mang rdzong (Guinan) County, Mstho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mstho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* s65:301-302.

On Monday, 25 March 2024, at five a.m., Rta lo rgyal went to town to get the injectables, which took forty minutes from his home by private car. He returned at nine a.m. We started administering the injectables at nine-thirty a.m. Neighbors assisted. It took two hours to treat one hundred yaks.

## TIBETAN TERMS

bde skyid བདེ་སྦྱིད།  
gser mo mtho གསེར་མོ་མཚོ།  
ma rdo མ་རྡོ།  
mang zdong མང་རྫོང་།  
mgo mang མགོ་མང་།  
mstho lho མཚོ་ལྗོ།  
mstho snon མཚོ་སྒྲོན།  
rgaya kho རྒྱ་ཁོ།  
rta lo rgyal རྟ་ལོ་རྒྱལ།  
sha rgya ཤ་རྒྱ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Guinan 贵南  
Guomaying 过马营  
Hainan 海南  
Qinghai 青海  
Xingfu 幸福



# MAKING GRO KHRA BREAD FOR TIBETAN NEW YEAR (2024): 'BA' DGON TOWNSHIP, CHU DMAR LEG COUNTY, MTSHO SNGON PROVINCE, PR CHINA<sup>1</sup>

Bkra shis rab rgyas (Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰)

1 minute 31 seconds

<https://zenodo.org/records/15354291>

I am Bkra shis rab rgyas (b. 1997). My mother (Zla ba bzang mo, b. 1972) makes *gro khra* for Lo sar 'Tibetan New Year'. *Gro khra* comes in two colors - brown and white. The brown part is made in two ways. One involves boiling tea, removing the tea leaves, and adding flour to the tea water. The second is to add black sugar to water and mix flour with it. After preparing the brown and white dough separately, Mother rolled them out on a chopping board. She twisted the two doughs together, cut them into pieces, and deep-fried them in vegetable oil.

Filmed in Thang skyid Village, 'Ba' dgon (Bagan) Township, Chu dmar leb (Qumalai) County, Yul shul (Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China by Bkra shis rab rgyas in 2024 at his home.

## TIBETAN TERMS

'ba' dgon འབའ་དགོན།

ཁྱེ།

chu dmar leg རྒྱ་དམར་ལེག་

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོ་ན།

yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ།

bkra shis rab rgyas བཀྲ་ཤིས་རཐ་རྒྱལ་

gro khra གྲོ་ཁྲ།

thang skyid ཐང་སྐད།

zla ba bzang mo རྩ་བ་བཟང་མོ།

---

<sup>1</sup> Bkra shis rab rgyas (Zhaxirangjie 扎西让杰). 2025. Making *Gro khra* Bread for Tibetan New Year (2024): 'Ba' dgon Township, Chu dmar leg County, Mtsho sngon Province, PR China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:303.

## LITERATURE

## TRAVEL FROM YUL SHUL (YUSHU) AND FIRST URBAN EMPLOYMENT IN SOUTH CHINA<sup>1</sup>

'Dan ma bkra shis rab rgyas འདན་མ་བཀ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ།  
(Daima Zhaxirangjie 戴玛扎西让杰)

When I first went to Rwa rgya in 2016, I was twenty. Most people called our school "Rwa rgya School," after the name of the place where the school was located in Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The school's formal name was Gangs ljongs shes rig nor bu'i slob gling or 'Snowland Sherig Norbuling'.

To get there, I first took a bus from Chu dmar leb County Town to Zi ling, an 855-kilometer, eighteen-hour journey over a dirt road. The ticket cost 250 RMB. In Zi ling, I stayed one or two days while I bought clothes. My favorite sport was basketball, so I bought a pair of good-looking basketball shoes at the beginning of each semester. I stayed in a hotel room overnight, paying around 120 RMB. I could have stayed with some of my very kind relatives who lived in the city, but I was uncomfortable troubling them. I preferred to live in a hotel.

What also made me uncomfortable was wanting to go places for different views of the city and shopping, but I was afraid of getting lost and being unable to find my hotel. So, when I arrived in Zi ling City and got off the bus, I told a taxi driver to take me to where I had bought clothes before. My nephew had introduced me to the city center. After arriving there, I booked a hotel nearby. Sometimes I ventured a little further from the hotel in a different direction, while paying careful attention to various landmarks, like big brand names or colorful brand names in lights on buildings, to help me find my way back to the hotel.

Next, I caught the bus from Zi ling to Rwa rgya. It took almost seven hours and cost eighty RMB. On this exciting

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Dan ma bkra shis rab rgyas འདན་མ་བཀ་ཤིས་རབ་རྒྱལ། (Daima Zhaxirangjie 戴玛扎西让杰). 2025. Travel from Yul shul (Yushu) and First Urban Employment in South China. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:305-322.

journey, I saw hills on the flat grassland where locals had pitched white tents. Each family was burning yak dung that sent spirals of light blue smoke through chimneys, joyfully dissipating into the purity of the blue sky. Thousands of sheep and yaks grazed on lush green grass surrounding the white tents. Fertilized by sheep dung, nature's colorful flowers bloomed on the endless grasslands, their fragrance carried by gentle breezes that rushed through the open windows of the bus. High-end perfumes are inferior to the scents of those flowers. That grassland might have been the locals' summer camp. Most of the herders seemed to be girls.

That environment was a paradise for living beings and seemed very different from my home, which has many very high mountains. This place had no high mountains, just some hills with vast stretches of grassland.

In my home community, we lived separately, especially in the summer camp. Most of our community's families lived as single families. Even if some of our relatives jointly used the grassland, at most two families lived together. But here I saw what seemed like many families living together in this camp. I wondered how they identified their own livestock, and if they lived together only during the summer camp or all year round.

Later, I decided to set myself a goal for two reasons. First, I wanted to go to big cities and learn more about them so they would no longer confuse and scare me. I couldn't independently go where I wanted, and sometimes, when my parents and I went to Zi ling, we followed relatives familiar with the city. As locals who had not been to school said, "We are like yaks when we go to Zi ling."

I really felt like a yak when I was walking along the streets.

I had heard stories from when I was around ten years old, for example: when three men from our community went to Zi ling for the first time, one cried, saying he was far from home, surrounded by unfamiliar people, and missed his home community.

I also wanted to see more beautiful landscapes, to travel more, but didn't want to use my parents' money to do these two things. I wanted to earn the money myself.

...

One afternoon as my school winter holiday approached, I finished lunch and returned to my dormitory, fatigued from a morning of classes. I met Ban bde tshe ring from Co ne, who was a grade lower than me. Neither tall nor short, his hair reached above his bright eyes, and he wore a Tibetan robe with a red sash around his waist. He wore sports pants and black leather shoes. His outfit suggested that he wasn't gifted at sports or dance. I had never seen him on the playground or during the school's anniversary celebrations, and he wasn't part of the dance team.

He held a notebook in his right hand and seemed to be looking for someone. I didn't know him well, but since it was just the two of us there, it would have been awkward if I had pretended not to see him. So, removing my right hand from my Tibetan robe pouch, I prepared to shake his hand. When he noticed, he shifted the notebook to his left hand and shook my hand.

I asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm registering."

"What are you registering for?"

"Come with me to work in a city industry this winter holiday."

"What do I need if I go?"

"Nothing. The company pays for the train ticket from Lanzhou to Suzhou and food while you work."

"How much can I make?"

"5,000 to 6,000 RMB a month."

I thought this was a good opportunity, but I also worried about telling my parents. They would refuse to let me go if I told them I wanted to work. I thought a lot about this while talking with him.

"It's OK, just go," he said.

I answered, "I'm not sure, so just register yourself because I need to think more about it."

A few days later, I found Bsod nams rdo rje, Yon tan rgya mtsho, Shes rab, and Bor bu talking in our classroom about Ban bde tshe ring registering those who wanted to go to the city for work. I asked, "Do you guys want to go?"

Bsod nams rdo rje answered, "Yes."

Bsod nams rdo rje was older and taller than me and he was thin. Sometimes his big mouth revealed uneven teeth. Wind and sun made his cheeks red as an apple. He liked wearing Tibetan clothes. It was rare to see him not wearing them. He was a gifted Tibetan calligrapher, a Smar khams circle dancer, a poet, and a story writer.

I only know one dance that he taught me. Our major was Tibetan, and we were deskmates. We had a wide range of topics to discuss. Sometimes when I wrote something, I asked him to edit the piece. He would laugh, but I wasn't angry because I could feel him smiling gently at me, not in a way that denigrated me. The most attractive thing about him was his personality. Everyone in class liked him.

Bor bu's dressing style leaned towards the modern. His major was English. He liked learning English and often read English material. Sometimes he wrote poems in Tibetan and posted them on social media. We enjoyed talking to each other while working together, watering trees, and picking up garbage, jobs required of all students. We also enjoyed talking during our free time after class.

Yon tan rgya mtsho was a little short and a little fat. He liked dancing, writing stories, and reading. His major was computers.

Shes rab was tall and fat. He liked dancing, writing poems, reading, and learning Chinese and math. He also liked playing football. When he spoke, his tone showed that he was a kind person. They were both from Chab mdo. We all had only attended primary school before coming to Rwa rgya and knew little Chinese.

After I heard that they wanted to leave to work, my desire to work grew stronger and stronger. Every day, I thought about how to tell my parents, but ultimately, I decided to lie to them and say that I would study computers during the winter holiday.

The teacher gave us our phones on Friday, which were collected late Saturday. When my father called me, I said, "I'm not returning home this winter holiday. I'm going somewhere to study computers."

I was worried he would ask me where I would study computers, but he didn't. I felt so relieved. He just said OK.

Later, Ban Bdeb bde tshe ring registered students to go to the city for work, and some students followed him. This became known throughout the school, and the students and teachers discussed it.

Our Chinese teacher was a tall, young man. Most of the time, he liked wearing sports clothing. He was fond of sports and knew a lot. He was good at Tibetan, Chinese, and math, and knew some English. He was from Co ne. His main job was translating from Chinese to Tibetan and Tibetan to Chinese. He also had an active social life. His favorite sport was basketball. We all liked listening to him when he told us things about sports and basketball in class.

Most of our schoolmates and teachers who liked playing basketball were fans of LeBron James, but our Chinese teacher said he didn't like LeBron James. His favorite NBA star was Shaquille O'Neal. So later, I checked out Shaquille O'Neal online. He was very strong, and the videos showed that he dunked and even smashed the backboard when he was young. But now he was retired. Anyway, our Chinese teacher was our favorite teacher and we all looked forward to his class.

Once during class, while we were having a little rest, someone asked our Chinese teacher, "Is it dangerous to go to work in the city?"

He answered, "I don't know much about that, but in my hometown, some college students have gone to work in the city, and nothing bad happened to them."

After finishing the winter final exam, our head teacher came to our class at night and said, "I heard some students are planning to go to cities to work?"

He told us this was not allowed, that it was against the school's rules, and that if we went, we would be punished upon our return.

This worried me a lot. I thought it would be very hard for me if I went and then was punished when school started. I had seen some of my schoolmates cause trouble and break school rules, and they were punished by having to do tasks after class such as digging holes. Most students slept in the afternoon because we needed to wake up early in the morning, and attending afternoon classes was very hard for me without that afternoon nap. So, I didn't want to be punished. But my classmates who wanted to go to the city for work didn't seem bothered by what the head teacher had said.

Two days later, we finished chanting scriptures, and the next day was the start of our holiday. In the afternoon, we cleaned the schoolyard. That night, we held a meeting in the conference room, as we did before each holiday. While respecting our school headmaster, teacher Jigs med rgyal mtshan, I thought about what he would say about us going to the city for work. While the headmaster and some teachers gave awards to an excellent class, I waited. After all the activities, the headmaster began his speech. At the end of his speech, he mentioned, "I heard some students are going to work in the city. I heard some people went to work in coal mines, had to go underground, and never returned."

However, he didn't tell us not to go or mention that we would be punished when we returned.

After the meeting, I returned to the front of the dormitory gate where my classmates, some of my schoolmates, and Ban bde tshe ring were gathered. I joined them. Ban bde tshe ring began, "There's no danger or harm. It's fun. But you don't have to go if you don't believe me. It's up to you."



My classmate, Bsod nams rdo rje, asked, "Train ticket, food, and a bed in the factory - are you responsible for that? Can you make sure of it?"

"That's what I can promise you guys. The company will be responsible," Bsod nams rdo rje said.

I believed Bsod nams rdo rje because he was my schoolmate and an older student. But I also thought about what the headmaster had said—going underground for work and never coming back, disappearing like that, which would make my parents very sad. I thought about it, but I still wanted to go. After we talked, Bsod nams rdo rje said, "I booked a bus to Lanzhou. The bus will be near Rwa rgya Monastery. We'll gather in the schoolyard tomorrow morning, and after the teachers announce the holiday, we'll secretly run to the bus."

The next morning, around five a.m., our class gathered, and our head teacher gave a short speech, reminding us to stay safe. Afterward, he told us to gather in the yard where all the school students were assembled. There, our vice-headmaster once again reminded us of when school would start and then announced the holiday had begun.

Those of us who were heading to the city for work took our suitcases and hurried toward Rwa rgya Monastery. When we boarded the bus, I checked and saw that all the schoolmates who had gathered the previous night were there. Ban bde tshe ring counted twenty people present. He said there were twenty and so we began the journey.

I had some worries on the way, but I was also happy going to a new place. I chanted and then fell asleep.

We arrived in Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu Province, around six p.m. Ban bde tshe ring told us we needed to rent a hotel near the train station, so we followed him. After walking for about ten minutes, we arrived at the train station where Ban bde tshe ring called someone. A few minutes later, two men arrived, one short and the other a bit taller. Ban bde tshe ring said, "This is my brother," pointing to the taller one. They took

us to a hotel, which Ban bde tshe ring's brother said was the cheapest option.

I asked him whether he was going to the city for work too.

He answered, "Yes. My brother said your teachers were worried, but nothing dangerous or bad will happen. Every year, I go to the city for work. Don't worry, we'll have lots of fun."

Around eight a.m., the company bus arrived, and we boarded it. It was raining. Half an hour later, I realized the work was not in the city because the bus had already left the city. An hour and a half later, we arrived at the factory. A fat Chinese man talked with Ban bde tshe ring. Then we were taken to a meeting room with many seats, where some women and men were seated. One woman gave each of us a paper form to complete and sign.

Afterward, a lady with tattooed hands called me and one of my classmates. We followed her into a large yard where their workers were, and then entered a spacious room where around six to ten women were working. A man, standing, was putting some items in a box. Others were sitting, each holding a long decimeter machine in one hand and something in the other. I was watching when Ban bde tshe ring called us and said we had to go to the hospital for tests.

Ban bde tshe ring, and the fat Chinese man took us to a hospital where a nurse took a sample of my blood. On our way back, Ban bde tshe ring told me the company had assigned us dormitories. I reminded him I needed to live with my classmate from Chab mdo.

The company assigned us a quilt and a bed sheet.

The next morning at eight a.m., I went to my leader, the woman who had introduced us to the workplace. She explained the work conditions, including the hours. Work started at eight-thirty a.m., with dinner at six p.m., and a one-hour lunch break at noon. The company stipulated that employees could leave work at eight p.m., but could choose to work until ten p.m. I wanted to do the extra hours because I had come to work to earn money and didn't want to miss any opportunities.

The work was making small parts for cars. Some workers had to stand for three or four hours, and some had to sit for the same time. I found both tasks difficult. My feet hurt after half an hour while standing, and my bottom hurt when I sat.

By the second day of work, my whole body ached when I lay down to sleep. I had never done such difficult work before. A classmate, who was supposed to work at the same factory, didn't show up, so I called him. He said he didn't pass the blood test, so he had gone to another city for work.

A week later, in my dormitory, Tshe ring jigs med from Nang chen said he couldn't handle the work and wanted to leave. His leaving disappointed us because he was talkative and made everything more fun, which helped when we were tired.

The female leader often scolded senior workers when they made small mistakes. However, she had never scolded me when I made mistakes. I had been working for only one month and was still a student and didn't know what she thought of me.

One morning, Ban bde tshe ring came and told me to go with him to open a bank account and get a Chinese ID card. I asked why I needed that.

"The company salary will be deposited into this card."

Five days before Lo sar, Ban bde tshe ring told us the company would give us 500 RMB for the holiday. I was happy because I only had 200 RMB left, and I didn't want to ask my parents for money since I was working.

At night in our dormitory, we discussed where we would go during Lo sar and eventually decided to travel to Shanghai.

One day before Lo sar, the company let us leave at five p.m. to start our holiday. When I returned to my dormitory, lanterns were lit all over the yard. I missed my family so much that day. At home, my brother and I would often dig ice and take it home, placing it around the house or at the four corners of the yard. I missed those times intensely.

The next morning, we started our journey to Shanghai around ten a.m. First, we walked about five kilometers to the subway station. Then we bought our tickets before taking the

subway for the very first time. It was fast and exciting. Once we reached the train station, we bought a high-speed train ticket to Shanghai. Besides us, there were only two Chinese people in the carriage. The express train was very clean and comfortable. Just half an hour later, we arrived in Shanghai.

Getting off the train, we found ourselves among crowds of people. We wanted to go to Dongfang Mingzhu 'Oriental Pearl Tower', but when we checked the ticket vending machine on the map, there was no place named Dongfang Mingzhu. A few minutes later, some of our schoolmates showed up. One who knew Chinese well asked us where we wanted to go. He explained that it was called Waitan and helped us buy subway tickets there. After another hour of traveling, we arrived but didn't know which exit to take. Relying on our instincts, we were lucky to come out of the exit facing Dongfang Mingzhu. It was right in front of us. I was so excited and happy because I had only seen it in pictures and on TV. The buildings had shapes I had never seen before.

A few minutes later, we found a restaurant and ordered noodles. They were so expensive, each bowl costing twenty-seven RMB. We'd never had such expensive noodles, and the taste was no different from those we'd often eaten in other restaurants. It was around ten p.m. when we exited the restaurant, and the road was still full of people heading towards Dongfang Mingzhu. We were curious why so many people were going there at this late hour, so we followed them. It was so crowded that at times it was hard to walk. Arriving in front of Dongfang Mingzhu, I could see that it was even more beautiful now than during the day. The buildings were spectacularly lit up with colored lights.

Shortly after, we checked hotels online. As expected, the hotels near Dongfang Mingzhu were expensive, so we called other schoolmates. They said they had reserved hotel rooms and generously invited us to join them. So we did. They had paid 1,000 RMB for the hotel room, which we shared. Around eleven-thirty, they reminded us that it was New Year's Eve and that

there would be firecrackers at Dongfang Mingzhu at midnight. Some of them went to watch the fireworks, but I did not because fireworks don't interest me, and I missed my family. In the end, the fireworks display didn't happen for some reason.

After midnight, I checked WeChat Moments and saw lots of videos and pictures about Lo sar. I missed my family a lot and knew they missed me too. This was the first time I hadn't celebrated Lo sar with them, and my heart was filled with tears. When I was a child, Lo sar celebrations were all about enjoying food and fireworks, but now, it was about gathering with family and sharing special food.

This celebration brought back many memories. It's always sad for me when family members can't join in.

We woke to cold weather the next morning and returned to Dongfang Mingzhu, but it wasn't as beautiful as the night before. So, we checked online for other special places to visit. We found the Shanghai Film Park outside the city, took the subway to the last station, and then caught a bus. It was dark when we arrived an hour later. A short walk later, we saw the Shanghai Film Park gate. But now we needed a hotel. Luckily, here the hotels were cheap. We found one where the room cost eighty RMB, so we stayed there that night.

Fortunately, the next morning was sunny. We bought our tickets for eighty RMB each and were pleased to find it special once we got inside. There was an old train track with a train next to it. We went to a building with many Japanese cars inside, and on the house's second floor, there was a Japanese flag. "Perhaps, many years ago, Japanese people had lived there," I thought.

After exploring, we sat on the grass and had lunch, which we had bought before coming in. When we left the park, it felt like we'd been inside a movie and were now stepping out into another world.

As we returned to the train station, one of my classmates messaged me asking if I wanted to go to Hangzhou.

I asked my classmates if they wanted to go, but they said they didn't have enough money. I still had around 300 RMB but

wasn't sure it would be enough. When I checked the train ticket price from Shanghai to Hangzhou, I was surprised that it was quite cheap, only forty RMB for the slow train. I still wasn't sure if I had enough money for the whole trip, but then I remembered the Chinese proverb, "In heaven, there is paradise, and on earth, there are Suzhou and Hangzhou."

I wasn't that interested in Suzhou because that was where I was working, but I had never been to Hangzhou, and it was near. I decided not to miss this opportunity and replied to my classmate, telling him I would go and to wait for me at the train station.

My classmate and I started our journey from Shanghai to Hangzhou around nine p.m. While on the train, we did an online investigation of tourist attractions in Hangzhou and found West Lake was recommended so we decided to visit it that night and find a place to stay nearby.

We paid 180 RMB for a hotel room, and after dropping off our things, we went out for dinner. My classmate had a bowl of noodles, and I had fried rice with eggs. Returning to the hotel, we saw an advertisement for Hangzhou scenic spots and asked the hotel manager to recommend places to visit. She suggested it was better to follow a tour guide, which cost one hundred RMB per person. The guide would take us to six different places. She also mentioned that if we wanted to take a boat ride on West Lake, we would have to pay, but if we went with a tour guide, the boat ride would be included.

We then decided to go with a guide. Originally, we had planned only to visit the lake, but now, with a guide, we could visit more places and take a boat ride. Later, the hotel owner confirmed that she had given our number to the tour guide, who would call the next morning around eight a.m.

The next day, it was rainy as we boarded a bus with about thirty, mostly older people. We were the youngest. The tour guide first took us to West Lake, where there were many trees and a stone statue that the guide described as a poet who had lived here and written poems about West Lake.

There were also some nearby restaurants. The guide suggested we go have breakfast before getting on the boat.

My classmate and I checked the restaurant menu, but there was no vegetarian dishes, so I said I wouldn't eat but would wait for my friend.

He didn't want to eat alone, so we left and found someone selling a simple breakfast. I asked for two eggs. While chatting, we didn't pay attention to how the eggs were cooked that she gave us in a plastic bag.

We walked for a few minutes, found a seat, sat down, and opened the bag. The eggs were warm, but their shells were brown. It was the first time we had seen eggs with brown shells. We joked a little, and then I said, "These must be rotten," so I threw mine away, and my friend did the same. I later learned from a former girlfriend that the eggs were brown because they had been cooked in tea.

We soon boarded the boat. It was the first time we had been in a boat. When I looked down at the water, I felt dizzy but excited. At the same time, I was a little worried that we would have no The chance of surviving if the boat capsizes. Rain and fog concealed everything, so we couldn't see much.

Next, the tour guide took us to a shop selling cotton clothes and explained everything. Afterward, she took us to a shop that sold knives. There were many seats, so we sat. Very soon, a man arrived and started advertising their knives nonstop. I was bored and ended up sleeping for half an hour. I was upset that the tour guide had tricked us into wasting time in shops.

We left the knife shop at around two p.m. and headed to what the guide said would be the last tourist attraction. The bus stopped at a valley entrance, and we followed the guide down a forested path for about an hour until we came to a temple. Once inside the temple yard, I noticed most tourists were heading to a specific room. My classmate and I followed them.

Inside, I saw a statue of an actor from a TV series I had loved when I was ten. I had watched and rewatched the 1985 TV series *Ji Gong*, starring Ji Gong, a monk who drank, possessed

magic abilities, and used his magic to help poor people seek justice against corrupt officials. I was surprised to see his statue in the temple, went closer to look, and discovered it was made of gold. Most people were prostrating before the statue. I didn't. While admiring him for helping poor people in the TV series, I lacked faith in him. I looked at the statue again and then moved on to another part of the temple.

I soon realized that all the places in the temple had been shown in the actor's TV series, so I understood that this was his temple. My classmate and I visited more rooms. Some displayed clothes that I had seen him wear in the show.

After visiting the temple, the last stop on our tour, we returned to the train station and bought tickets to Suzhou. After checking our money, we realized we didn't have very much.

When we reached the Suzhou station, it was around eleven p.m. The buses had stopped running, so we had no choice but to spend the night in an internet café near the station. There was a twenty-five RMB per person charge at night. We paid, bought instant noodles, watched a few films, and slept.

In the morning, we got on the subway and then took a bus to the industrial area, where I found my classmates sleeping in the dormitory. I had no money left, but luckily, they bought some bread that I ate. Later that evening, the leader at my workplace inquired on WeChat, "Who wants to return to work? You can start the day after tomorrow."

I was delighted and immediately sent a message: "I'm ready to start working."

Two weeks later, just as our work term was about to end, Ban bde tshe ring announced that the company would give us half of our salary now, and the other half would be deposited on our bank cards in two weeks.

I was worried, thinking they might not deposit the remaining money. I earned around 7,000 RMB, but they only gave me around 3,000 RMB. Still, that was more than enough to get me back home.



I had never taken an airplane before, so I wanted to try, but I didn't know how to buy a ticket. I asked a young man at work who was my friend to help. He did, and the ticket cost 500 RMB from Shanghai to Lanzhou.

My classmate went back home by train, but one of my schoolmates bought a plane ticket for the same day as mine, although our flights were at different times. We took the fast train to Shanghai and went to the airport to pick up our tickets. It was also my friend's first time to fly. I was nervous when we entered the airport and stumbled a bit. He noticed and said, "Don't be nervous. It's okay," but later, I could tell he was nervous too.

We showed one of the customer service staff members at the airport our ticket information, and she assisted us in printing our tickets from the self-service kiosk. My flight was at eight a.m., so we stayed overnight in a nearby hotel. The hotel owner informed us that a taxi to the airport would be available in the morning if we needed one. I told her I would take the taxi she recommended. My friend's flight was in the afternoon, so he wasn't so worried.

I couldn't sleep well that night. I was anxious about being late the next morning and unsure how to find my way around the airport. My flight required a transfer, making me more nervous.

The next morning, I went to the airport by taxi and showed my ticket to a customer service representative, who directed me to the right place. Airport security thoroughly checked me and my belongings. Finally, I made it to the terminal lounge, waiting for my flight. That had been much easier than I had expected. People had been very helpful.

When boarding, I saw several airplanes up close for the first time. They were so beautiful. Once I got on the plane, I noticed how clean everything was. The female attendants were beautiful, and the male attendants were handsome. I was lucky to have a window seat, which made me happy because I thought I'd be able to see some beautiful views.

As the plane took off, my heart started racing. I was a little scared, but I felt better once we were in the air and things stabilized. Surrounded by clouds, I looked down but couldn't see much. It reminded me of my childhood, herding livestock on the mountain, watching planes fly by, and staring at them without blinking. And today, here I was, sitting on an airplane. I was happy, though a little worried, thinking there would be no hope if the airplane fell to earth. After three hours, I started feeling bored because I couldn't see anything. It was just emptiness. I realized that both trains and airplanes felt small but were stable.

Finally, as I stepped off the plane in Lanzhou, my father called. I told him I had gone to work and taken an airplane back to Lanzhou. He didn't scold me. He just said, "So that's it. You don't need to send money. I had some interesting thoughts, but anyway, you worked, and nothing bad happened to you. That's good."

He asked about my experience on the airplane, and I told him it wasn't very exciting.

When I arrived in Zi ling, I noticed the sky was so near and beautiful with clouds, but the buildings seemed smaller and the streets dirtier. It reminded me of the first time I went to Zi ling. When I had returned to our township, it had felt even smaller. Now, when I compare Zi ling to Shanghai, Suzhou, and Hangzhou, Zi ling feels like my small township town. I no longer worry about getting lost in the streets and feel more confident navigating them.

When I arrived in Zi ling, my brother and Mother were there, and we went shopping. Mother talked very loudly to the sellers, even when they were right next to her. It was a bit embarrassing, but I didn't say anything. I understood. I also act that way sometimes. Such behavior doesn't mean we are bad people. We live on the endless grasslands with the tallest mountains, and that's why we behave this way. Mother is kinder and more honest than urban retailers. People in cities have different ideas from ours.

Two days later, I was with a monk friend who had a bad right leg and walked with a stick. He told me that when he was a child, he and his brother killed frogs, and his leg became ill. I didn't let him go into more detail because it was a pitiful situation. He also told me he flew to Mgo log by airplane the day before for just 300 RMB. I said goodbye to my brother and mother and flew to Mgo log with my monk friend.

When I returned to school, I worried about trouble with the teachers for going to work, but they didn't mention it.

I realized this was the hardest work I had ever done. As a child, I thought herding livestock was difficult, but working in the city was harder. It's not just the labor; you must pay attention to your leaders' moods. For example, where I worked, the lady manager often scolded the workers harshly.

Overall, this journey was nearly perfect. I accomplished most of it on my own, without the help of older adults, gaining valuable life experiences in the city and learning about life's difficulties and rewards.

I learned to buy online tickets and collect them from machines. I also learned to manage my money - when to save and when to spend. Before this journey, I had only taken taxis in Zijing because I didn't know how to catch buses. I also saw various landscapes, which I appreciated and enjoyed. I thought I could take such a journey again, but that wasn't my most important takeaway.

Most valuable was realizing study and teachers were most important for me and would benefit future generations. I realized learning through education was a better path for me. If I ever get another opportunity to travel, I don't want to miss it.

During the next holidays, I went home. Some jobless young men in my town spent their days playing basketball and drinking beer, which made me uncomfortable. I encouraged them to go to the city to work, explaining they could earn money, gain experience, and visit big cities. Some expressed interest, so I helped them contact Ban bde tshe ring and ask him to help

them find jobs. I also helped them buy train tickets and explained how to take the subway in the city.

When they returned home, they told me how wonderful the experience had been. Now, they go to the city every winter for work, and in spring, they return home to collect caterpillar fungus. Over time, they have learned how to find work and buy tickets independently.

## TIBETAN TERMS

'jigs med rgyal mtshan འཇིགས་མེད་རྒྱལ་མཚན།  
bsod nams rdo rje བསོད་ནམས་རྡོ་རྗེ།  
co ne ཙན།  
bu'i

lo sar ལོ་སར།  
nang chen ནང་ཆེན།  
rwa rgya ར་རྒྱ།  
smar khams མཐར་ཁམས།  
མེད།  
yon tan rgya mtsho ཡོན་ཏན་རྒྱ་མཚན།

ban bde tshe ring བན་བདེ་ཚེ་རིང་།  
chab mdo ཆབ་མདོ།  
gangs ljongs shes rig nor

slob gling གངས་ལྗོངས་ཤེས་རིག་ནོར་བུའི་  
སྐབ་གླིང་།  
mgo log མགོ་ལོག།  
nor bu ནོར་བུ།  
shes rab ཤེས་རབ།  
tshe ring 'jigs med ཚེ་རིང་འཇིགས་  
zi ling ཟེ་ལིང་།

## CHINESE TERMS

Dongfang Mingzhu 东方明珠  
Lanzhou 兰州  
Suzhou 苏州  
Xinjiang 新疆

Hangzhou 杭州  
Shanghai 上海  
Waitan 外滩

## TATTOOED<sup>1</sup>

Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས།

Tsomo sat on the chair next to an old Chinese woman for a moment, then stood and walked back and forth in the hall. The lower part of her robe dragged on the floor, sweeping up a tangle of long hair on the white tile. Once she resettled on the chair, the hair settled next to her feet.

Lhamo glanced at the screen hanging on the wall before approaching Tsomo and nudging the hairball aside with her feet. A middle-aged woman clad in a grey uniform with the Chinese characters for "Chengning Number One People's Hospital" on her chest pocket used a long stick broom to sweep the hair into a dustpan. The sweeper shook her head as she looked at Lhamo.

Tsomo looked at the screen, which displayed names of Chinese characters in rows, but she couldn't read Chinese. She then stood and asked Lhamo to sit. Finally, Tsomo said, "I can't bear it. I must pee. Where's the toilet?"

Lhamo read the names on the screen and said to Tsomo, "You're next. The doctor will call you soon. Just endure it."

A doctor called the old Chinese woman sitting next to Lhamo, who went to the X-ray room. Tsomo sat next to Lhamo, bent slightly forward with her hands on her lower belly, and groaned, "I can't bear it. My bladder's going to explode."

Looking at the X-ray room door, she pressed her lower lip against her upper teeth, wrinkled her nose, panted, and repeatedly shut and opened her big eyes.

When Tsomo emerged from the X-ray room, she rushed to the toilet at the end of the hall.

The elevator was packed, with mostly women. Tsomo was pressed into one corner. An old man accidentally stepped on her foot. Instead of shouting, she pulled her feet back. She noticed the absence of hair on the man's top head and observed his skull.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས། 2025. Tattooed. *Asian Highlands Perspectives*. 65:323-329.

As the elevator descended, beads of sweat formed on the bald spot of the man's head. She almost burst into laughter but controlled herself, thinking that the man would get angry if she laughed at him. It was her first time crammed into an elevator filled with various odors. She felt suffocated and dizzy. They descended from the twentieth floor to the first floor. Although the elevator stopped on almost every floor, no one disembarked till they reached the first floor.

After exiting the elevator, Tsomo took a long breath and walked through the lobby. She noticed many people looking at her. In her fabric robe, she was the only person dressed differently. A little girl dressed in green shorts and a white shirt with a bear image on the back stopped walking and stared at Tsomo as she passed by. Tsomo looked at the girl and thought she was adorable, holding a red balloon in her left hand. The mother said something Tsomo didn't understand to the little girl and pulled her away. Tsomo hurried to Lhamo, who had already reached the exit door.

...

While having lunch at a Muslim restaurant near their hotel, Tsomo sipped the noodle soup and said, "The soup is nice. I was uncomfortable when people stared at me in the hospital lobby."

Lhamo responded, "They were probably surprised you were wearing a robe in hot weather. Later, we can buy you some more appropriate clothes."

"People will think it's ridiculous if a herds woman wears modern clothes. I don't want others to laugh at me," declared Tsomo.

"If you wear a shirt and pants, others won't think you are a herds woman," suggested Lhamo.

Tsomo agreed and looked at Lhamo, who was wearing a white shirt and jeans. A drop of soup stained her shirt above her chest. "Probably, I'd feel cooler if I wore a shirt and pants."

Tsomo couldn't finish her meal. Lhamo handed her a napkin to wipe her forehead and then threw the damp paper into

a plastic trash can near her foot. Lhamo gave her another piece of paper and asked her to wipe her lips, which she did.

...

At four p.m. that day, Tsomo lay on her back on a big bed in the a hotel double room with a round table and an armchair by a window. She was now wearing a white shirt, black pants, and a pair of red socks. Her shoes were under the chair. Her big breasts were squeezed into the shirt. She was not wearing a bra, and the shirt was sheer enough to reveal the color of her nipples.

She got up, walked to the window, and looked out, watching vehicles moving in different directions on the roads and people walking on the sidewalks. Her phone rang on the bed, and she picked it up. It was her husband, Nyima.

"My sister, Lhamo, went to the hospital to get the results. I'm staying in the hotel. Where are you?" asked Tsomo.

Nyima replied, "I'm herding yaks on the mountain. What did the doctor say?"

"We saw the doctor this morning. She doctor was weird. She asked me to open my legs and put something inside me."

"The doctor can't tell what's wrong with you if they don't check. How did you feel when the doctor put something inside you?"

"I'll tell you when I return home."

"Okay. Are you happy in the city?"

"It's too hot. Will you scold me if I tell you something?"

"What is it?"

"First, promise you won't scold me?"

"Okay."

"I'm wearing a pair of pants. It's too hot to wear a robe in this city."

Nyima chuckled.

...

Having now returned, Lhamo carefully applied red lipstick while looking into the mirror on the wall over a sink. Tsomo stood behind Lhamo, combing her hair. Lhamo turned, "I would be happy if I were as tall as you."

Tsomo smiled, "I can't go to the bar. If my husband found out, he would be angry."

"Quickly comb your hair. It's not a real bar because you can order food and juice," explained Lhamo.

When Lhamo told her to put on lipstick and perfume, she declined and continued combing her hair.

•••

Tsomo and Lhamo sat at a table near a window. Tsomo nibbled on some chips as she looked around. Wine and liquor bottles filled two shelves behind the counter. The waiters and waitresses were busy mixing drinks and serving their concoctions to customers. There was a big refrigerator near the counter full of bottles of beer. Ceiling fans were turning. A yellow-haired man and a black-haired woman were playing table tennis in the middle of the room. Other people were chatting loudly with their friends.

Tsomo was attracted by a handsome man sitting with three women at a table two tables across from her. He had close-cropped hair and a tattoo on his neck. He wore a white shirt, and sunglasses were perched on his head. He periodically drank from the beer bottle he was holding. When the bottle was empty, he showed it to his friends. Tsomo decided he was a showoff and shifted her gaze to other people in the room. A young man and a woman sat near the table tennis game. Red flowers, beer bottles, small glasses full of beer, and a plate of fried chicken legs adorned their table. Tsomo sniffed the odor rising from the chicken legs and swallowed. The young man leaned over the table and kissed the woman, who clutched the man's shoulder and kissed him back. Tsomo was uncomfortable witnessing this and quickly looked at Lhamo, who was busy with her phone.

Sipping her orange juice, Tsomo continued to study the bar's patrons. Two-thirds of them were young men. She said, "It's much easier to find boyfriends in cities compared to rural areas. How many boyfriends did you have when you were a university student in this city? I regret refusing to go to school when Father asked me to."



Lhamo sipped beer, "Drink and eat. Don't constantly look at others, or they'll be uncomfortable."

Tsomo giggled and took another sip of her juice as her phone rang. She answered, "I can't hear you very well," she said.

"It's so loud. Where are you?" Nyima asked

Lhamo raised her hand to her mouth and said in a hushed voice, "We're having supper in a restaurant full of people."

She looked at her wristwatch and inquired, "It's ten. You still haven't gone to bed. What are you doing?"

He said, "I told our kids to do their homework. They just finished. We're going to bed. Did you get the medical result?"

"The doctor said I'm okay. No serious illness."

"Wasting money! I told you that you don't have any health problems. But you often complained that you were in pain."

She hung up as her husband raised his voice.

Looking now at the tattooed man, Tsomo asked, "Why do people get tattooed on their necks?"

Lhamo sipped, "Each tattoo has a special meaning to each person."

Tsomo was unsure of the significance of this comment. She watched the tattooed man walk toward his table from the toilet in one corner of the room. He walked confidently with his hands in his pants pockets. He noticed Tsomo looking at him and smiled. She felt shy and immediately shifted her gaze to her glass. She felt her cheeks burning and heard her heart pounding.

Lhamo noticed a change and asked, "What's wrong with you?"

Tsomo didn't know how to explain and then hesitantly pointed at the man, "He smiled..."

Lhamo interjected, "Don't point at others. They might get angry. Don't act like a herds woman."

Tsomo stuck out her tongue and said, "Okay."

While Lhamo busily chatted with her boyfriend on WeChat, Tsomo grew bored and looked at the man again. Then,

the young couple passed by the man and walked toward the toilet, where the young man waited for his girlfriend. Tsomo thought they were a perfect couple, deeply in love and caring about each other. They seemed so different from how she and her husband were. She herded yaks alone while their children went to school, and her husband wandered here and there.

The man raised a glass of beer in the air, smiled at Tsomo, took a sip, and set the glass back on the table. Unsure of what to do, she smiled back and imagined, "I would marry this man if I were born in this city. No. I already have a husband. I would probably lose my husband if I imagined marrying another man. How horrible I am! The Three Jewels bless me. I mustn't even think about it."

She asked Lhamo, "Am I a loyal woman?"

Lhamo was shocked by such an unusual question, "Why do you ask such a question?"

"Nothing. Just say yes, or no."

"Yes."

"I need to go to the bathroom."

"I also need to go. Let's go together."

Tsomo glanced at the man when they passed him. He wore black shorts and white shoes. His legs were thin and white.

While washing their hands in sinks between the men's and women's bathrooms, the man again smiled at Tsomo and said something femininely, which she didn't understand. Tsomo was then shocked to see the man enter the woman's room and shouted, "Azee!"

"Don't shout! You scared me. What's wrong with you?" asked Lhamo.

"A man entered the women's toilet."

"Who?"

"The person with a tattooed neck."

"She's a woman."

"Why is she dressed like a man? She looks like a man. I thought she was a man."

"In cities, some women dress like men, and some men dress like women. You don't know much about city life, do you?"

"Oh! What did she say to me?"

"She said, 'You're beautiful.'"

"She is beautiful. She would be the best-looking man I've ever seen if she were a man."

"Don't tell me you like her."

Tsomo shook her head.

Tsomo couldn't sleep that night. She stared at the ceiling and contemplated, "Why is she dressed like a man, and why does she look like a man? Why did she tell me I'm beautiful? Does she like me? Impossible! Women don't like other women. Why am I thinking about her? Do I have a crush on her? Impossible. Maybe?"

...

As Tsomo lay naked on the bed, a naked person with a tattooed neck stood near the window, drank some water, and, setting the water bottle on a table by the window, turned towards her. She was shocked as she looked at the person's crotch and screamed.

This unusual dream woke Tsomo. She looked around the room and saw Lhamo naked, deeply asleep, on the bed by her.

## TIBETAN TERMS

Lhamo, lha mo ལ་མོ།

Nyima, nyi ma ཉི་མ།

Tsomo, mtsho mo མཚོ་མོ།

## CHINESE TERM

Chengning 成宁

## NEW NEIGHBORS<sup>1</sup>

Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལགས།

As fog drifted amid the valleys and rose into the sky one sunny morning, herders drove their yaks and horses to the grassy mountains to graze. The herders made loud noises to deter hidden wolves from attacking the livestock and sending them fleeing. Once the herders were sure the livestock were secure, they returned home from the mountains for lunch.

Lhadzom, a tall, slim girl, stood beside her family's tent, watching her father, Nyima, mounted on a herding yak as he passed their neighbor's tent. The neighbor's lazy watchdog lay on the ground, lifted its head reluctantly, glanced at Nyima, barked once, and then settled his head back down on his forelegs. The head of the neighbor's family, Gyatso, a tall, fat man with long curly hair, and his son, Drashi, emerged from the tent. They enthusiastically invited Nyima to join them for tea, but he politely declined and continued riding the yak toward his home, where he dismounted and securely tied it to a stake.

Lhadzom ran over and grasped his hand tightly. Bending down, he kissed and gently stroked her head, looked into her large eyes and, observing her rosy cheeks exclaimed, "What a pretty little girl!"

A big smile spread on Lhadzom's face. She was eight years old and taller than Drashi, who was her age.

The two children walked into Nyima's tent, where Nyima removed his woolen hat before settling onto a dried yak skin rug. Lhadzom knelt and leaned against her father, causing him to lose his balance and nearly topple to one side. Tsomo handed him a basin filled with steamed buns. Lhadzom took the basin from Tsomo while Nyima placed his bowl on the ground. Once settled on one side of the tent, they all enjoyed fresh milk tea and warm buns.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལགས། 2025. New Neighbors. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:330-333.

After lunch, Lhadzom watched Drashi playing near a small river. Then she went walking for a while, suddenly stopping and looking at her left hand, which was covered with warts. She searched her pockets for gloves but found nothing, so she hurried back home. Sitting by her father, she said, "Father, our yak ate my gloves. Please buy a new pair for me."

Her father sipped his tea, "It's summer, and you don't need gloves to keep your hands warm."

Tapping his shoulder gently, she showed him her left hand, "I don't want others to see my dirty hand."

"Your hand is not dirty," her father insisted.

Lhadzom put her arms around his neck, "Drashi said my hand is dirty. I ..."

Tsomo interjected, "My shoes are worn out. Please go to town and buy a new pair. I don't want the neighbors to laugh at my worn-out shoes."

Nyima protested, "Today, I need to herd our yaks. I'll go to town tomorrow and buy a new pair of shoes and gloves."

Lhadzom burst into tears and cried loudly. A few years ago, Nyima promised Lhadzom that he would go to the town and buy a new pair of shoes once her shoes were broken. He repeatedly promised to go to the town the next day and buy new shoes for her but never kept his promise. When Lhadzom played with her playmates, they laughed at her tattered shoes.

Tsomo kissed Lhadzom, looked at Nyima, and said, "Go to town and buy gloves for her."

Nyima looked at Lhadzom and consoled her, "Don't cry. I know how you can remove the warts from your hand."

Lhadzom stopped crying and looked at Nyima, who continued, "When I was a child, my grandmother told me that the first time you visit a neighbor's family, rub the hand with warts on the family's tent's door cloth. The warts will then disappear."

Lhadzom smiled, "Are you sure it will work?"

He replied, "I'm sure."

Lhadzom had not visited Gyatso's family, even though they had been neighbors for a month. There had been a brutal conflict over grassland in their community between two families, and the leader had decided to divide the land again among the households by lottery. As a result, Gyatso and Nyima became neighbors. Drashi had invited Lhadzom several times to have a meal at his home after they played. She wanted to visit Drashi's home but refused each time because she was afraid of Gyatso, especially after witnessing him beat Drashi with a dried yak leather rope near their family's tent because Drashi had broken a bowl a high-ranking lama had given to Gyatso, which he considered priceless.

It was time for the herders to drive their yaks and horses back home from the high, spectacular mountains. Nyima mounted the yak to lead his family's yaks back home. Meanwhile, Lhadzom saw Drashi walking near his family's tent. She wanted to play with him, but she hesitated. The day before, she and Drashi had built human and animal figures with mud near a stream. Accidentally, she had touched Drashi's hand while picking up mud from the ground. Drashi scolded, "Don't touch me with your dirty hand. I don't want to get warts on my hands."

The next day, Lhadzom was excited to visit Drashi's family home once she was sure that Gyatso had gone to herd his family's yaks. As she entered the tent, she discreetly rubbed her left hand over the cloth of Drashi's tent door. Drashi's mother, Kyiko offered Lhadzom a bowl of fresh boiled milk, but she didn't accept, running back home instead.

Once home Lhadzom told Tsomo, "Mother, I rubbed my left hand over our neighbor's tent's door cloth several times."

Tsomo said, "Great. Then your warts will disappear soon."

...

Lhadzom went to Drashi's home the following summer and asked him to play with her. Drashi quickly looked at her delicate hands, noticing that the warts were gone. However, without responding to Lhadzom, he exited his family's tent and sat down

near the entrance. Lhadzom followed and noticed he was wearing black fabric gloves. Seeing the unhappy expression on his face, she consoled, "Don't be sad. Your warts will disappear soon. We can still play together. I don't mind warts on your hands."

Drashi lowered his head and remained silent. As Lhadzom walked away, Drashi lifted his head and watched her. He wanted to apologize to her for the hurtful words he said about her hand when it was covered in warts, but no words came from his mouth.

#### TIBETAN TERMS

Drashi, bkra shis བཀ་ཤིས།  
Gyatso, rgya mtsho རྒྱ་མཚོ།  
Kyiko, skyid kho རྒྱུད་ཁོ།  
Lhadzom, lha 'dzoms ལྷ་འཛོམས།  
Nyima, nyi ma ཉི་མ།

## WHITE SPOT<sup>1</sup>

Gu ru 'phrin las ཀུ་རུ་ཤྭ་ལྷན་ལམ་

Tsomo, in her forties, squinted at the police officer, who was jotting down what she told him. The officer stopped taking notes and momentarily stared at her disheveled hair that hung in two braids down her chest. Saliva dribbled from her two long, protruding front upper teeth, seemingly widening the gap between them. Her neck and face turned red as she spoke angrily. The officer calmly said, "Complaining to me won't solve the problem. It's my job to try to identify the thief. I can't guarantee we'll catch him. It's your responsibility to take care of your livestock so you don't lose them. It makes no sense for you to be angry once they're gone."

Tsomo wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and took a deep breath.

Drashi interjected, "Since only one yak was stolen, the thief must be from our village. If an outsider came here, he would have stolen more than one yak."

In a sad voice, Tsomo responded, "My daughter heard a truck around midnight and didn't investigate. Maybe an outsider loaded my yak into a truck."

"Where's your daughter?" the officer asked,

Tsomo replied, "She's out herding yaks."

Drashi felt his heart pounding and got nervous, but he kept his composure and said, "It's impossible for an outsider to have driven a truck and loaded your yak. Road conditions in our community are terrible. Driving a truck here's very dangerous for outsiders unfamiliar with the road, especially at night."

The officer agreed, "Exactly! If you don't drive carefully, a car could easily run into the large holes in the road. I wouldn't have found your family if Drashi hadn't brought me here. It's unsafe for your family to live alone in this valley. It would be best

---

<sup>1</sup> Gu ru 'phrin las ཀུ་རུ་ཤྭ་ལྷན་ལམ་ White Spot. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:334-339.



for your family to live with a neighbor so no one will steal your family's yaks."

...

Gyatso mounted his motorcycle and pulled a black woolen scarf from his robe pouch. Lhadzom approached him, and after glancing at her family's tent door to ensure her mother was not coming out, she kissed him. He then wrapped the scarf around his blunt nose, big mouth, and wide forehead and, starting the engine, said, "I'll ask my friends about your family's lost yak and see if they can help us. Don't forget to discuss your family's grassland leasing business with your mother."

She watched him drive away, dust drifting into the sky.

...

It was night and dim inside the tent. The only light was a flickering butter lamp on a small table in the upper part of the tent. Lhadzom stopped chanting, turned to Tsomo, and said, "Mother, we should lease our grassland to Gyatso's family. He's a good man. He'll appreciate it if we lease our grassland to his family."

Her mother continued chanting a mantra with her palms together over her forehead. When Lhadzom repeated what she had said, Tsomo responded, explaining that she had promised Drashi they would lease it to his family, who was moving here soon.

"Are you out of your mind? He's not our relative. Why would you want to lease our grassland to his family?" exclaimed Lhadzom.

Her mother replied, "He brought the policeman to our family. The police wouldn't have found our home if he hadn't brought him here. Drashi is a good fighter. Others are scared of him. If his family becomes our neighbor, others won't dare steal our family yaks."

"The police didn't find the yak thief," added Lhadzom.

Tsomo wanted to say something, but Lhadzom went off to bed.

...

Drashi pulled a dead one-year-old yak calf from his family's yak enclosure while his tall, slim wife fed fodder to four weak yaks. There were around ten yaks in the enclosure. Drashi threw the dead calf near the bank of the Yellow River. Vultures hovered before landing on the corpse and pecking at it as Drashi returned home.

A black watchdog chased the vultures away and began eating the carcass. Some minutes later, Drashi asked his wife to tie the dog and let the vultures eat the corpse.

...

It was a starry, bright, moonlit night. A small hut made from frozen yak dung was near the gate to Lhadzom's family's yak enclosure. Lhadzom slept in the hut every night to prevent yaks from being stolen. She rested her head on Gyatso's chest and ran her hand over his belly. He stroked her head, "Don't trust Drashi. He's a cunning liar."

"But he's good-looking and says nice things about me," said Lhadzom.

Gyatso sneered, "Okay. You think he's handsome because he has a big nose and a small mouth. Go ahead and trust him if you think he's a good person."

"His brother is a good monk. I hear him chanting scriptures every morning when I drive my family's yaks past their family's tent."

Gyatso agreed.

...

One year elapsed in a flash.

Adding dried yak dung to the stove, Tsomo said, "Drashi's brother chants every morning, accumulating merit. That's why our family hasn't lost any yaks since Drashi's family became our neighbor. It's better to lease the grassland to Drashi's family."

Lhadzom countered, "Drashi's family has around 400 yaks. There isn't enough grass for that many yaks. Our family's yaks have become weak. We should lease the grassland to a family with less than one hundred yaks."

"Yaks becoming weak is much better than someone stealing them. Drashi can protect our family's yaks from thieves," argued Tsomo.

...

Gyatso and Lhadzom stood at the bottom of a small hill near her family's tent, in a spot where nobody from her family's tent could see them.

Gyatso said, "Last time, you promised to make sure your mother would lease the grassland to my family. But now you say your mother has decided to lease it to Drashi's family again. Be smart. If my family becomes your neighbor, we can see each other every day. Then you can explain to your mother that you want to marry me."

Lhadzom nodded, "Of course, I hope you become our neighbor, but I don't have the right to..."

Gyatso mounted his motorcycle and said, "You often say the same thing. I don't have the right to do what...what... What do you have? You have a big ass," and drove away.

Gyatso saw a tall man standing on the road, who raised his hand to stop him. When he got near him and stopped, Gyatso realized it was Drashi, who asked, "What brought you here? To see the beautiful girl?"

"None of your fucking business," Gyatso replied, as he tried to drive away.

Drashi grabbed his shoulder, his dark face flushed with anger, "From now on, don't come to visit Lhadzom. Beautiful girls don't love a poor man like you. She's my girlfriend," and spat in Gyatso's face.

Gyatso stared at Drashi for a moment without blinking and then drove away when Drashi released him.

...

Lhadzom leaned against Drashi as they sat on a mountaintop, watching their families' yaks grazing on the mountain. She noticed a big yak with a white spot on its forehead. She hadn't seen this yak before and asked him about this yak. He explained that he had bought the yak from his friend a few days earlier.

A few days later, as they again herded yaks on a mountain together, Lhadzom noticed the big yak's white spot had disappeared. Pointing to it grazing nearby, she asked, "What happened to the white spot on its forehead?"

"This is another yak. I sold the one with a white spot."

"This yak looks exactly like the one with a white spot."

"Conflict ensues if two families have similar yaks."

...

Drashi's wife, Kyiko, angrily declared, "If you refuse to move back to our own family's pasture. I'll divorce you. You've been herding with Lhadzom while wolves attacked and killed our yaks. You were busy chatting with that bitch instead of tending our family's yaks. What a horrible husband!"

Sitting cross-legged beside the family's shrine table, the monk said, "Stop arguing! We can move back to our land."

Drashi nodded.

...

Three days after Drashi's family moved back to their land, Lhadzom rushed to her family's tent from the yak enclosure, as her mother emerged from the tent. Panting, Lhadzom announced, "One of our female yaks is missing!"

Her mother said, "No doubt someone stole it. I told you no one dares to steal our family's yaks as long as Drashi's family lives with us. Thieves have started to steal our yaks now that Drashi's family has moved back to their land."

They reluctantly walked toward the yak enclosure.

...

A grey-haired woman looked at Gyatso and said, "Don't tell the police. They'll take him to jail."

Gyatso replied, "Dear Mother, if I don't tell the police he won't confess to stealing our family's yak."

The grey-haired woman insisted, "Forget it. It's OK to lose one yak. I don't want you involved in trouble. Your safety is more important than a yak."

...

Gyatso, two policemen, and Drashi gathered in Drashi's family's yak enclosure one rainy day. The policemen checked the yak and questioned Drashi about how he got it. A white spot appeared on the yak's forehead and grew larger as the rain continued. Handcuffing Drashi, the police asked how he colored the yak's white spot. In a trembling voice, Drashi said, "Black ink."

The yak near Gyatso sniffed his robe sleeve and grunted. Gyatso stared at Drashi and, clenching his fist, ran at him, punching him in the face. Drashi stood there. He did not defend himself or retaliate. When Gyatso attempted to punch him again, a policeman stopped him.

...

Gyatso met Lhadzom at the bottom of the hill, looked at her big, double-lidded eyes, and announced, "I discovered who stole your two yaks."

She eagerly asked, "Who?"

"Drashi confessed to the police that he stole them. He sold the male yak to his friend from another town, who loaded it onto a truck and drove to his home on the night the yak went missing. He slaughtered the female yak. Don't worry. The police told him to compensate your family."

Tears streamed from her eyes, tracing a path down her red cheeks. She sobbed and embraced Gyatso tightly.

## TIBETAN TERMS

Drashi, bkra shis འགྲུ་ཤིས།

Gyatso, rgya mtsho རྒྱ་མཚོ།

Kyiko, skyid kho རྒྱུ་ཁོ།

Lhadzom, lha 'dzoms ལྷ་འཛོམས།

Tsomo, mtsho mo མཚོ་མོ།

## COLLECTING DEBTS<sup>1</sup>

Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས།

Tall, skinny Tarwa stands in front of a mirror on the wall, next to the entrance door. His raven, glossy hair tumbles down his wide shoulders. He leans toward the mirror as he shaves. He rubs a hand over his cheeks, ensuring all is shaven. Stepping back, he examines his reflection, dusts his pants leg, and places the razor on a small table by the mirror.

Tarwa walks over to thirteen-year-old Nyima, who is sitting on a sofa, counting a stack of one hundred RMB bills on a table in the middle of the living room. The table's surface is red from the cash that covers it. Tarwa settles on a straight-backed chair at the table, glances at his son, and smiles. Nyima asks, "Father, where did you get all this money?"

"I found it on the street. Arrange it into bundles of 10,000," Tarwa lies, not wanting his son to know he won the money by gambling.

Tarwa reaches into the table drawer, pulls out some rubber bands, hands them to Nyima.

"Tie each bundle with these."

Nyima stops counting, starts bundling the cash, and says, "The other day, you said you needed 100,000 RMB. Is this 100,000?"

"No. Only 99,000."

"You're very rich!"

"A rich person has much more than this."

Tarwa stands and moves into his bedroom, which adjoins the shrine room. A large, dull-red wooden bed with a dragon-carved headboard is next to the window. He picks up a black leather cross-body bag from the bed and takes a pair of black sunglasses from the nightstand. He looks at a framed photo on the nightstand of three-year-old Nyima sitting on his lap. His son

---

<sup>1</sup> Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལས། 2025. Collecting Debts. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:340-348.

wears a red sun cap and holds a bouquet of yellow flowers. He runs a hand through his hair, pushing the front hair back, and positions the glasses on top of his head.

Tarwa returns to Nyima, crams the bundles of cash into his bag, making its belly bulge as if it were about to burst. Nyima gazes at his father's sharp nose, and big eyes beneath the thick eyebrows. He feels proud whenever someone says he resembles his father. He's certain his father is heading somewhere, as he always puts on his glasses and takes his bag when he leaves.

"Father, where are you going?"

"To visit Drashi's family."

Tarwa had visited Drashi's family just the day before.

"Again?"

"Yeah."

"Father, how much did you lend him?"

"1,500. No more questions. Children shouldn't ask too much."

"Yes, Father."

Tarwa slings the bag over his right shoulder and asks, "Do you want something to eat?"

"No. I'm not hungry."

"I'll be back this evening. Tomorrow, we can go to the county town and buy you a bicycle."

A smile spreads across Nyima's plump face. He runs to his father and wraps his arms around his father's waist. "Father, come back soon. I'll be waiting for you at home."

He walks with his father to the door, leaping like a rabbit.

Tarwa gets in a white sedan parked near his family's gate. He slams the passenger door shut and glances at his friend, Wanlo, sitting in the driver's seat. Wanlo is short with a messy, too-long mustache partially covering his thick upper lip and wearing thick-lensed glasses held together by a cheap gold frame.

"Did you wait for me a long time? I forgot you were waiting for me."

Wanlo's big nose widens as he smiles, "It's fine. I've got nothing to do. No problem waiting for you, even for hours."

Tarwa laughs and says, "Drive to the Yellow River Restaurant. Getting to Drashi's home takes hours, so it is better if we eat something first."

"OK," Wanlo replies and starts the engine.

•••

Their restaurant table is soon crowded with fried sheep ribs, fried green chili with beef, crispy potato chips, fried potato with pork, Budweiser beer cans, and two paper cups of black tea. Wanlo raises his can with a big smile and toasts. Tarwa gulps down his beer and throws the empty can at the garbage bin under the table, which is already overflowing with beer cans. The can falls onto the tile floor. Tarwa kicks it aside as it bounces near his feet.

A young waitress, wearing a red apron, refills the teacups of two men sitting by the window having noodles, and returns to the kitchen.

Suddenly, Tarwa slams a beer can on the table. Wanlo is startled. His big frog eyes grow bigger as he leans back.

Tarwa yells, "Waitress!"

Wanlo looks at Tarwa's angry, gloomy face and has no idea why he is suddenly enraged but he doesn't ask what's wrong.

Tarwa bellows, "Waitress!" several times.

The waitress emerges from the kitchen and shuffles over to Tarwa. He stares at her stonily and scolds, "Walk fast. Don't walk like a cripple."

As she nears her, he grabs her waist with his right hand and says, "Are you blind? Can't you see my cup is empty?"

She locates the communal kettle sitting atop the stove in the middle of the room and refills his cup. She squints at him and retreats into the kitchen. Tarwa hurls a beer can at her but misses. The can rolls on the floor, spilling beer in a long line. Tarwa stands, slamming his fist on the table, and shouts "Bitch!" at the kitchen.

He then sits when a tall muscular cook comes out with a mop, silently cleans up the mess, and returns to the kitchen.



Dawa sits near a window with his friend. A few days earlier, Tarwa had learned that Dawa was dating one of his girlfriends. He hates him and is waiting for an opportunity to fight him. As soon as, Tarwa notices Dawa glancing at him, shaking his head, and whispering to his friend, he grabs a beer can, walks over to Dawa, and says, "You want to fight me?"

Tarwa hits Dawa's shoulder with the can and sneers, "Coward! Don't talk about other people's shit if you're not a real man."

The other man says, "All he said was you shouldn't throw cans at the waitress."

Tarwa hits Dawa again with the beer can. "None of your fucking business," he shouts staring at the man, "Shut the fuck up. I didn't ask for your shit."

The cook rushes in and inserts himself between Tarwa and Dawa to diffuse the tension. He grabs Tarwa's hand and pulls him away from the table. The beer can slips from Tarwa's hand and falls onto the floor.

Meanwhile, Wanlo holds a stool and walks toward Dawa. Tarwa had once lost a fight and then punched Wanlo for not helping him. Whenever someone bullied Wanlo, Tarwa had to handle the problem and sometimes ended up fighting for him. Wanlo shoves Dawa with his shoulder, sending him back into his seat but Dawa quickly jumps up and throws a punch at Wanlo's face. Wanlo dodges, stepping back, but slips on the beer can and falls to the floor with the stool hitting his head. He stands and shoots a look at Tarwa who the cook is escorting outside. Wanla is sure he can't defeat Dawa without Tarwa, so he also goes outside.

The cook says to Tarwa, "It's on me. We're friends."

Tarwa insists, handing him 1,000 RMB. "I didn't come here for a free meal. Take it, or I'm not leaving."

The cook reluctantly takes the money and opens the passenger door for Tarwa.

...

The car honks as Wanlo pounds the steering wheel and says, "Dawa's a coward. You should've beaten him to a pulp," and adds in a trembling voice, "I wanted to smash his head with the stool and see his head dripping blood, but someone pulled me back."

Tarwa rolls up the right sleeve of his jacket to his elbow, revealing a gold bracelet on his wrist and a tiger tattoo on his hand. He slams the dashboard with a fist and says, "That son-of-a-bitch was lucky today. If the cook wasn't my friend, Dawa could be in hospital. No rush. I'll deal with him."

"Teach him a lesson. It'd be nothing for you, the bravest hero in our community, to beat him senseless."

"This time, I'll hurt him differently. A friend of mine is a capable thief. I'll ask him to steal his family's yaks."

"I hate him, too. Let me join your friend."

"Why don't you do it yourself."

Wanlo smirks, "One man can't load big yaks onto a truck. Much easier for two."

Tarwa chuckles.

...

The car parks 500 meters from Tsomo's home, near the banks of the Yellow River. Sometime after Tarwa gets out of the car, Wanlo steps out of the car and lights a cigarette, puffing as he watches Tsomo's house, checking to see if Tarwa is emerging from her house. Tsomo is home alone while her husband, Tsedon, Tarwa's friend, is away. Earlier this morning, Tarwa ran into Tsedon in a gambling house in town. Tsedon asked him for a loan.

A few days earlier, Tsedon had lost a large sum gambling and was hoping to go to the county town to win back his losses. Tarwa refused, knowing that lending would only lead to further losses.

Tsomo and Tarwa had once planned to marry, but Tsomo's parents rejected the match because Tarwa was his single mother's only child. His mother never married and died when Tarwa was twenty-six. Tarwa married Lhamo when she was twenty-one. The marriage lasted seven years. He remained

unmarried, even though beautiful young women wanted to marry him.

Wanlo gets in the car when he sees Tarwa walking from Tsomo's house yard and drives toward him.

...

Wanlo shakes his head, "Locals believe Tsomo is the most loyal woman and only has sex with her husband. I thought she truly loved him."

"Pure love doesn't exist. Even if a man loves a woman deeply, she won't understand or appreciate it."

Wanlo recalls Tarwa's conjugal life before responding. Lhamo had complained about doing all the housework alone while her mother-in-law, Dzombe, was busy herding their family's yaks. Lhamo eventually asked Tarwa to move in with her parents. He agreed, but later regretted leaving his mother alone, especially after Lhamo had run off with a man nine years her junior. Dzombe didn't speak to Tarwa for a year after he moved to Lhamo's home. A year later, Dzombe sold all their family yaks, moved to the township town, and lived alone in a small house. After Lhamo gave birth to Nyima, Dzombe asked Tarwa and Lhamo to come and live with her so she could care for her grandson.

Wanlo nods and says, "You're right." He then changes the topic, "How much does Drashi owe you?"

"That asshole owes me 1,500. He promised me he'd come and repay it today, but he didn't show up this morning."

"I doubt he can repay it this time."

"I'll break his neck if he doesn't."

"His wife just got home from the hospital. Her treatment must be expensive. Maybe it's better to give him more time."

"I need to get the money. Years ago, I gave him some money to take his mother to a hospital when she got tuberculosis. He doesn't appreciate it and instead fucking lies to me. There's 99,000 in this bag. Once I get the 1,500 from Drashi. I'll have more than 100,000."

"What are you planning to do with 100,000?"

"You'll find out once Drashi pays me."

"OK."

•••

The car sounds an alarm as the temperature warning light turns red. Wanlo suddenly presses the brake and Tarwa's head almost hits the windshield. Tarwa, enraged, scolds, "Motherfucker. You're fucking crazy!"

Wanlo turns off the engine and smiles, "The temperature warning light is on."

"Junk car! Keep driving! Let it burn up."

"It's not a big problem. It will return to normal as soon as the engine cools down."

Wanlo lights a cigarette. Tarwa steps out to pee. Wanlo wants to let the engine cool to avoid damaging his car, but Tarwa is in a hurry to get home before dark. Ten minutes later, they continue their journey with Tarwa driving on the grounds Wanlo is not a skilled driver and that's what caused the overheating.

An old, massive black yak lumbers into the road, stopping in the middle. Tarwa honks but the yak doesn't budge. The temperature warning alert sounds. Tarwa glances at the red light on the dashboard and then floorboards the accelerator, throwing Wanlo back in his seat as the car hits the yak, sending it crashing to the ground. Tarwa continues driving without looking back.

Wanlo looks through the rear window and sees the yak standing on its two front legs while its lower body seems paralyzed. He says, "Poor yak. You shouldn't hurt innocent animals. Otherwise, you'll be born in hell."

"Idiot! Shut your fucking mouth. You know nothing."

"Lamas say so. Everything they say is true."

"Not always. Some lamas are very rich and don't need to worry about their livelihood, so they often speak without thinking."

Wanlo wants to call Tarwa an atheist, but knows that would piss him off, so says nothing.

The temperature warning sound irritates Tarwa. He accelerates, sending Wanlo back into his seat again as dust swirls behind the car.

...

Nyima and his playmate, Tsering, take turns riding Tsering's bicycle in Tsering's family's house yard. Their families are neighbors, and Nyima often plays with Tsering whenever his father is away. Although it's Nyima's turn to ride the bicycle he looks up at the sky and says, "It's getting dark. My father will be back soon. I have to go home. I promised to wait for him at home."

"We can play one more round since your father isn't back yet."

"My father promised he would buy me a bicycle. Tomorrow, we're going to the county town. If you need anything, let me know. I can buy it for you."

"Great. We can ride our own bikes and have lots of fun."

Nyima rushes home just as he hears a car horn. Without looking back, shouts, "Must be my father!"

...

The smell of smoldering plastic wafts through the car. Smoke and steam pour out from under the hood. Tarwa speeds up and says, "I have to get home before it's dark. My son is alone at home."

Wanlo clenches Tarwa's right arm a few minutes later, "Please stop! Stop the car! Don't burn up my junk car."

Tarwa jerks his arm away, and the car veers off the road, pushing Wanlo against the side door. Tarwa struggles to regain control of the car, swerving wildly until it hits a boulder and comes to an abrupt stop. Rivulets of blood trickle down Tarwa's head, which seems glued to the steering wheel. Tarwa faces Wanlo, who's shocked by the sight of Tarwa's blood-covered face. He then looks at the shards of glass scattered across the dashboard. Steam, smoke, and water spurt into the air from the car. The hood now resembles a bow.

Wanlo runs his hand over his head and face, checking for injuries. He touches a bump on his forehead, the result of his head hitting the windshield. Nothing else. Believing The Three Jewels have protected him, he puts his palms together and mumbles a few mantras.

A few minutes later, Tarwa partially opens his right eye. Everything is blurry. He vaguely realizes Wanlo is pulling his bag from his shoulder. He wants to stop Wanlo, but he can't even move a single finger. He thinks, "I need the money," but no words emerge as his eyes close and his breathing stops.

## TIBETAN TERMS

Dawa, zla ba ལྔ་བ།

Drashi, bkra shis བཏག་ཤིས།

Dzombe, 'dzoms pe འཛོམས་པེ།

Lhamo, lha mo ལྷ་མོ།

Nyima, nyi ma ཉི་མ།

Tarwa, thar ba ཐར་བ།

Tseden, tshe brtan ཙེ་བརྟན།

Tsering, tshe ring ཙེ་རིང་།

Tsomo, mtsho mo མཚོ་མོ།

Wanlo, ban lo, བན་ལོ།

YOLO<sup>1</sup>

Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལག་

At the third knock on the door, Yolo, with one eye half-open, rolled to the bottom of the bed, slipped on a pair of shorts he had left on a chair with his pants, shirt, and socks, and shuffled shirtless to the door. He opened it and was confronted by a stout, heavily made-up middle-aged woman with a large nose above a small mouth wearing a white shirt and black shorts. After scanning his tall, scrawny body from head to foot, she shouted, "Move out of this room!"

His eyes widened as he scratched his head of disheveled hair. He smiled and said as convincingly as he could, "I'll pay you tomorrow."

Noticing she was staring at his bare chest and belly, he rushed to the chair by his bed and squirmed into a shirt.

Pointing at him, she threatened, "You always say the same shit, but you never keep your word. You haven't paid me for three months. I'll call the police if you don't pay this time."

He took his MacBook from a table by the small window in his room, handed it to her, and promised, "Keep this if I don't pay you tomorrow."

She reluctantly took it as she looked around the one-window room. A garbage bin near the door overflowed with crumpled copy papers, empty cheap-beer cans, and cigarette butts. Shoes were scattered near a corner closet.

Wrinkling her nose, she ordered, "Clean the room!"

His small eyes narrowed as he faked a smile, "I was just about to clean it today."

She squinted menacingly, saying, "If you don't pay tomorrow, move out! I'll rent the room to someone else."

With that, she turned and slowly minced away.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gu ru 'phrin las གུ་རུ་འཕྲིན་ལག་ 2025. Yolo. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:349-354.

•••

Closing the door, Yolo sat down in an armchair at the table. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. He looked at the metal cup decorated with Tibetan and Chinese characters reading *1<sup>st</sup> YOUTH FILM FESTIVAL* and then began to read the new script he had printed out the day before. With a red pen, he began making some notes. In the script, a diligent and hardworking policeman uncovers the story behind a man's death. The deceased man's wife had fallen in love with another man. She and her lover suffocated her husband using a pillow, and then, to suggest the man had committed suicide, they put a rope around his neck. The woman tied the other end of the rope to a house pole after her lover had lifted the corpse. They then fled to a distant city and started a new life. Not long after, the woman discovers her lover is having an affair with another woman. Unable to bear the pain of her lover's betrayal, she ends her life by jumping off a tall cliff.

Yolo thought the script was too dramatic and changed the ending so that the woman ignores her lover's affair and continues to live with him.

He was lying back in bed when he took a WeChat video call from a friend. On the screen, a young bespectacled man wearing a blue shirt adjusted his glasses and asked, "Any update on your script?"

"The director refused to sign the contract. He said he couldn't manage the money to turn my script into a film."

"Some directors are weird and change their minds constantly. Don't worry. Failure leads to success if you persist."

"I'm editing my new script now."

"Great!"

As Yolo sat up and leaned against the bed board, his friend saw framed photos on Yolo's wall: photos of Akira Kurosawa holding an Oscar award between Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, Martin Scorsese covering his right eye with his right hand, Quentin Tarantino operating a camcorder, John Ford with a pipe clenched between his teeth and his hands on his



hips, and Wong Kar-wai wearing a pair of black-framed square glasses.

Suddenly, his friend announced, "You can be the director! Turn your script into a film yourself."

"I don't feel ready yet. I need more cinematic knowledge."

"There is no perfect time."

"I don't have the money to buy film equipment."

"Come on! That's an excuse! You'll find a way to do it if you really try."

Yolo nodded, admitting he lacked determination.

Looking at his digital wristwatch, his friend said, "I've got to go. My Tibetan literature class starts in thirty minutes. Talk to you later."

"Okay. Take care!"

...

Later, while Yolo was having beef noodles in soup with his friend, Jalu, in a small restaurant, Jalu wiped his big mouth with a napkin, adjusted his thick glasses, and said, "Don't worry. I'll send you the money later."

Yolo's friend's family land produced a rich yield of caterpillar fungus each year, so the family earned a lot of money by collecting and selling caterpillar fungus and renting portions of the land to other collectors. Yolo knew it was easy for his friend to lend him some money, but he was grateful. "Thanks so much! I feel embarrassed each time I borrow money from you. My landlady will kick me out if I don't pay now."

"No worries! We're friends. I've talked to our landlord and she said I could move into your building a few days later. That will make it convenient for us to participate in classes together."

"It must be fated! We were classmates at university and we are now in Beijing in the film-making training program together."

"Yeah. That's destiny."

Jalu attempted to wipe noodle stains from his white shirt but failing, said, "I like your script. I'm thinking of turning it into a film."

"Great!"

"We'll sign a contract after I talk to my co-director."

"Take your time."

A big smile started to appear on Yolo's face, but he quickly hid it when his friend looked at him and asked, "What's your plan for the evening?"

"No particular plan."

"Why don't we go watch Pema Tseden's *Snow Leopard*."

"Sure! We should support Tibetan directors."

Jalu booked the tickets on his phone and said, "It'll start at two p.m. In the meantime, I must return to my room and put on shorts. I'm melting in these wool pants. I have no idea why I put them on this morning."

"Sometimes we do things without thinking. Why not change after the movie? It's cold inside the theatre."

"I have to change now. I'm sweating buckets and uncomfortable. I can't bear it for even a few more minutes."

"Okay. Shall I come with you?"

"No. Go on to the theatre and wait for me there."

"Okay."

...

Yolo collected the tickets from a machine and bought two cans of Coke Zero. When the big clock on the wall showed five minutes to two, he started to worry and called Jalu and then sent him two voice messages. There was no reply. People entered the theater one by one, having had their tickets inspected by the young theater ticket checker. He called Jalu again but still no answer so he walked over to the ticket-checker, handed him one ticket, and said, "This is my friend's ticket. He'll be here soon."

"Leave his phone number."

Yolo obliged but, just as he entered the theater, he got a call and answered it without checking the number, assuming it

was Jalu. He froze when he heard, "Your friend was hit by a motorcycle and killed."

The police had checked Yalu's resident registration and called his landlord, who gave the officers Yolo's number.

"Impossible. You must be mistaken. He was with me not long ago."

"Come to Wenhua Street immediately!"

...

Police cars with flashing sirens were parked at the intersection. A crowd had gathered behind the caution tape, craning their necks to observe a body on the ground under a plastic sheet. Nearby was a damaged motorcycle. Its mirrors and headlight lay in shatters, and the clutch cable was broken. Gasoline had spilled across the road, filling the air with its smell.

A policeman led Yolo to check the corpse. He froze when he saw Jalu's bloodied, mangled face and stood motionless as four policemen talked to him. Tears welled up in his eyes.

A few minutes later, he squatted on the sidewalk, taking deep breaths. A tall woman in elegant high heels, a red skirt, and a white silk blouse approached him and thrust a bundle of cash into his pocket.

"I'm terribly sorry for your loss. My son is badly injured and in the hospital. I'm sure he didn't hit your friend deliberately. He must have driven fast and could not brake his motorcycle as your friend walked across the road. When your friends' family comes, help me console them. I'm sure the police will handle the situation."

He went to return the money, but she rushed over to a policeman, leaving him squatting alone.

...

The next morning, Yolo woke with a heavy heart. He felt empty and lonely as Jalu was his only real friend in this huge city. He stared at the ceiling and pondered how death could take a life anytime, without warning.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. He opened the door. The landlady handed him back his computer and said, "Next time, pay on time!"

"OK, OK," he said impatiently.

He shut the door after she left, sat at the table, and observed the room. The table, the chair, the bed, and a battered closet occupied most of the room's limited space.

He placed the laptop on the table and thought, "What's the meaning of life? My friend was only twenty-five. I'm two years younger. Maybe the meaning of life is to do what you love. Right. Why don't I turn my script into a film? Why not? Okay, I need to find a way to do it. Just do it!"

## TIBETAN TERMS

Jalu, skya lu སྐལ་ལུ།

Pematsheden, pad ma tse brtan བད་མ་ཚེ་བརྟན།

Yolo, g.yo lo གཡོ་ལོ།

## PUMMELED BY SLEET<sup>1</sup>

Mda' mo dhon grup rdo rje མདའ་མོ་དོན་གུབ་རྩེ། (Dongzhuduojie 东主多杰)

### 1

Our family's grassland lacked grass, so we needed to take our sheep to Bye gsang, the village's shared grassland. When I was nine, my father and I rode a horse, driving our sheep to the center of the shared grassland. After the local government divided the grassland, some areas were designated as public grassland. Villagers lacking grass drove their livestock there.

That morning, I woke up on the *hu tse* 'heatable bed' and looked out the window. Like most mornings, it was a sunny day. Birds were chirping on the *ma Ni* wheel in front of my family's house, as if they knew I needed to travel far soon and were urging me to wake up. The prayer flag tied to the *ma Ni* wheel pole, our family's weather indicator, swayed gently. Moving in the morning breeze meant winter winds might come soon, but it was summer, so there was no such possibility.

My mother prepared two big thermoses of tea, bread, and a bag of parched barley flour mixed with butter for breakfast. I realized we were really going to the desert. During dinner the night before, Mother had said we would stay at Uncle Mkha' 'gro's home near Bye gsang.

Time passed, and Father came home with an old horse strap, smiling as he greeted cheerfully, "Son, what a wonderful day without even a small cloud in the sky!"

"Haha! Maybe Sky-mother knows we're going to the desert today!" I replied while donning my robe.

Father put the horse strap in a saddlebag and said, "Perhaps! But we have a long journey, so let's eat breakfast now. I'll fetch incense while you wash your face and finish getting dressed."

---

<sup>1</sup> Mda' mo dhon grup rdo rje མདའ་མོ་དོན་གུབ་རྩེ། (Dongzhuduojie 东主多杰). Pummeled by Sleet. 2025. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:355-358.

He went outside to retrieve the incense plate hanging on the wall near the prayer flagpole. Birds scattered from the top of the *ma Ni* wheel, flying toward the sheep fence. As soon as Father brought the incense plate inside, the birds returned to their perch, like playful schoolchildren returning to their schoolyard.

I washed my face in an enamel basin, dried it with a towel, and added dry cow dung from a *sgye mo* 'woven bag' to the adobe stove to boil tea. "Is Mother done milking?" I asked, hearing her footsteps approaching.

"Oh, Mom's here!"

"Is the tea ready?" she asked, extending her hand to check the temperature of the pot top.

"Almost," I replied.

Father held the incense plate with smoldering dung he had taken from the stove.

Meanwhile, Mother added a few ladles of milk to the tea, mixing it with three gentle stirs. While it boiled, she scooped milk tea in the ladle and gave it to Father. He took it with his right hand, holding the *bsang kug* 'fabric incense bag' in his left. He returned outside, hung the incense plate, and expertly put seven incense ladles of barley with juniper on the burning dung. Holding the water scoop with his left hand and the fresh milk tea in a *bsang khem* 'offering ladle' in his right hand, he offered prayers to Dpal stul rdza rgan Mountain Deity in the north and chanted three times, "*Mchod oM a hU~M! Rdza rgan pha ma 'dra bo ...* 'Let's offer! Mountain deity as father and mother'."

After breakfast, Father tied the woolen saddlebag on the horse while I packed an old Tibetan textbook my older brother had used, thinking I might get bored herding sheep in the desert. Books were my constant companions during those long days.

When Mother saw me putting the book in my bag, she handed me a plastic cover and kindly said, "Use this. If it rains, your book could get wet."

"Good idea," I said, slipping the book into the cover.

"Don't forget to give this gift to your uncle and Aunt A nA," she reminded, pointing to a small bag with a red headscarf, a bag of *rdo ka ra* 'crystal sugar', and a bottle of barley liquor tied to the horse.

Father opened the sheep enclosure gate, and the sheep streamed out in a cloud of dust, bleating noisily, debating what type of grass they would eat.

2

Thin gray storm clouds gathered on the horizon, driven by a fresh breeze that felt like a sip of cold water. Clouds to the south darkened, moving quickly like steam from a boiling kettle. I anticipated rain wetting the dry ground beneath my feet. When I looked toward A myes rza rgn, the majestic mountain deity in the center of all the mountains, I thought he was a king kindly ruling his subjects. Near me, the desert seemed an enemy, encroaching on land where plants struggled to grow. There was lush grass in front of each of the desert hills, but no vegetation was on the back of the hills. The desert hills moved, swallowing the grass each year.

Father watched the sheep grazing, concerned some might wander onto the land of other villagers. He had warned me that pasture guards might catch and slaughter sheep that strayed onto their grassland.

After lunch of bread and milk tea, I drove back a group of sheep grazing too close to our neighbors' land. On my way back, sleet began to fall suddenly. I was only wearing a T-shirt and pants, not expecting sleet to come so quickly.

I was about half a kilometer from Father. I ran toward him as sleet pummeled my head, legs, and shoulders with sharp, stinging pain. I clutched my head and ran, jumping to avoid the icy barrage. The sound of sleet striking the ground mixed with the agony of each hit, especially the sleet beating my head.

Father strode toward me, wearing a long black raincoat. His heavy steps reminded me of King Gesar's knights rescuing their loyal followers. He wrapped me in his coat when he reached me, shielding me from the storm.

"Haha," he said, smiling and gently touching my head, "I told you to wear a raincoat. You said you'd run quickly. You shouldn't overestimate yourself."

The sheep and horse huddled together, waiting for the storm to pass. Once it was over, I pulled out my Tibetan book and began to read, the familiar comfort of words helping me forget the storm's pain.

## TIBETAN TERMS

a myes rza rgan ཨ་མེས་རྩ་རྒྱན།

a nA ཨ་ན།

bsang khem བསང་ཁིམ།

bye gsang བྱེ་གསང་།

dpal stul rdza rgan དཔལ་སུལ་རྩ་རྒྱན།

ge sar གེ་སར།

hu tse ལུ་ཙེ།

mchod oM a hU~M མཚོད་ཨོཾ་ཧཱུཾ།

mkha' 'gro མཁའ་འགྲོ།

rdo ka ra རྟོ་ཀ་ར།

rdza rgan pha ma 'dra bo རྩ་རྒྱན་པ་མ་འདྲ་བོ།

rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།

sgye mo སྤྱེ་མོ།



## PANDEMIC SPRING<sup>1</sup>

Dbyangs can skyid དབངས་ཅན་གྱི། (Yangjijie 羊吉姐)

Distant places and anticipated events disrupt the rhythm of our lives. Yet, life's true meaning often lies in embracing each moment, wherever we may be. I had never spent an entire year at home for much of my life. Due to school commitments, my time away was mostly spent in different cities and schools, except during brief summer and winter breaks.

In 2021, I began my first semester of graduate school in Beijing. After enduring winter's biting cold in the city, I returned home for the winter break in January 2022. Celebrating the Spring Festival with my family brought joy and connection I hadn't felt for a long time. However, the COVID-19 pandemic soon became the dominant news story, changing everything. Each time I consulted my phone, I was met with alarming daily infection numbers. Even local herders, who rarely discussed current events, began discussing the pandemic - an unusual, unsettling sign of the times.

The start of the new semester presented complexities. For parents, the prospect of schools reopening seemed like a relief after a long holiday spent with their children, who had grown increasingly dependent on their phones and resistant to studying or helping with chores. On the other hand, many students, especially young children, were thrilled about not returning to school and enjoyed the freedom of playing at home. One thing that stood out was a cousin's child who got fat at home and skinny at school. It was a small story about how children view school.

As neighboring towns and counties began reopening their schools, our village's lively holiday atmosphere began fading, leaving only a few familiar faces of herders, young children, and me.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dbyangs can skyid དབངས་ཅན་གྱི། (Yangjijie 羊吉姐). 2025. Pandemic Spring. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:359-361.

In March 2022, news came that classes would continue online rather than in person. It was during spring, a season I had always loved, when I was at home. Grasslands, though sparse, seemed filled with hope. Sheep and cows awaited the arrival of fresh grass, while we humans looked forward to warmer days.

Taking online classes from home in the valley was challenging and exciting. It was the most demanding semester of my graduate studies, with a heavy course load that required an intense commitment. I had to plan to make the most of my time, as no one knew when the pandemic would end. Before full-scale traffic restrictions were implemented, I ordered vegetable seeds online, anticipating that grocery shopping might become more difficult, especially since our pastoral area had limited fresh produce. My parents and I created a small vegetable plot and fenced it in front of our house.

I used a shovel to break up the compacted soil, creating a loose, workable texture, and added livestock manure. I then waited for warmer weather before planting. Meanwhile, I planted some seeds in small plates, placing the plates outside in the sun every morning and bringing them inside at night to protect them from the cold. My family and neighbors were curious about my efforts, questioning why I was going through such complicated steps and doubting I could grow vegetables in high-altitude conditions.

My eighteen-year-old younger brother returned to school, and my parents took our herds to the summer pastures, leaving me alone at home with my eighty-four-year-old paternal grandmother. My daily routine became a mix of attending online classes, tending the garden, and preparing meals for Grandmother and me.

As the days passed, I saw sprouts emerging from the soil on the plates. This little miracle filled me with joy. It felt like I was accomplishing something meaningful amid uncertainty.

As the weather warmed, I transplanted seedlings into the garden, and the vegetables flourished over time. My garden produced lettuce, Chinese wormwood, green onions, cabbage,

and spinach. Not only did these vegetables feed us, but I could also share them with neighbors. I was delighted to discover that many vegetables, such as lettuce, regrow if harvested properly.

Watering the garden became another delight. During those quiet moments, it felt as if time stood still. The pressures of coursework and papers began to fade. I began to imagine my life years earlier, surrounded by family, witnessing the beauty of spring, and having home-grown, fresh vegetables. Even during strict pandemic control, when no one knew when we would regain the freedom to travel, I found peace in these simple acts.

I never once felt bored after four months of online classes. When I returned to school and shared my experience with classmates, most found the period difficult, feeling disconnected and frustrated with online learning. But it was a transformative time for me. Cultivating vegetables while attending classes became a valuable lesson in resilience and mindfulness, teaching the importance of living in the present, appreciating what we have, and finding meaning even in isolation. I realized that even if one day I was cut off from the outside world, I could still live a fulfilling and meaningful life.

#### TIBETAN TERM

dbyangs can skyid དབྱངས་ཅན་གྱིད།

#### CHINESE TERM

Beijing 北京

## A BLOODY ELBOW<sup>1</sup>

Thub bstan 'jig med rnam rgyal ཐུབ་བསྐྱེད་འཇིག་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ།  
(Tuodanjiumainan jie 托旦久买南杰)

One day in spring in 2022, at around noon, three friends and I decided to take two motorcycles and picnic on a sandy cliff atop a grass-covered, flowery hill near 'Ba'rdzong County Town. It was a twenty-minute ride.

We divided the responsibilities. I was responsible for transporting four chairs from my home. The others brought a table, a large umbrella, a knife, cups, and a desk from their homes. We bought snacks, drinks, fast food, and a few bottles of beer in the County Town. Once everything was ready, we packed it all, tied it securely to the back of the motorcycles with ropes, and set off.

Each pair rode one motorcycle. We had a lot of stuff, and the road to the cliff was sandy and full of potholes. Our motorcycle control skills were poor, making our trip dangerous.

Upon our arrival, we were greeted by a beautiful landscape. From the grassy hill, we could view the county town below. The open space gave us a perfect spot to relax and chat while enjoying the view.

After resting for a few minutes, we began preparing for our picnic. We first chose a good spot and began unloading everything onto the ground. I used a stone to pound the bottom of the umbrella pole into the ground and then attached the upper pole and canopy. One of my friends set the table under the umbrella while the other two placed food and drinks on it. Once everything was in place, we were ready to enjoy our time there.

We sat, chatting and laughing, reminiscing about our school days. When our conversation shifted to our future, we talked more seriously like a group of middle-aged men. We joked around and talked about what growing up might be like. Time

---

<sup>1</sup> Thub bstan 'jig med rnam rgyal ཐུབ་བསྐྱེད་འཇིག་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ།  
(Tuodanjiumainan jie 托旦久买南杰). 2025. A Bloody Elbow. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:362-364.

flew by, and before we knew it, the sun was starting to set, so we began cleaning up and getting ready to head home.

We started our ride back at around six. I was driving the motorcycle with my best friend sitting behind me. The road was steep and full of curves, and I was driving fast. My friend said, "Slow down!"

"Don't worry!" I replied.

As we approached a turn a few minutes later, another motorcycle suddenly appeared ahead of us. I couldn't stop in time because of the speed. I swerved, so we didn't collide, but the motorcycle slipped on the sandy road. As the front wheel hit a stone, I lost control of the motorcycle's handlebars and was dragged for quite a distance.

It all seemed to happen in an instant. I didn't even understand what happened until I slowly stood as my friend came running to check on me. Our food and chairs were thrown all over the place. I was confused. Why had only I been pulled along?

I realized there was a hole in my clothes. My right elbow was scraped and bleeding. I realized that one of the motorcycle's handlebars had hooked onto my clothes, so I was dragged. My friend had fallen off during the slide and was not dragged like me/ He was not injured.

Our other two friends soon arrived. One motorcycle handlebar and chair were broken, but luckily, the motorcycle was still working. After gathering our scattered belongings, my elbow began aching. We carefully examined my wound and noticed some sand embedded in it. We wanted to rinse it with water but didn't have any. In a moment of desperation, we decided to use a bottle of beer to clean the wound. I endured the pain until we finished that procedure. Later, my best friend rode back home with me on the motorcycle.

I reached my home ten minutes later. Some of my clothes were soaked in blood, so I hid them in my backpack to avoid being scolded. As soon as I walked through the door, my mom saw my dusty pants and panicked.

"What happened?" she demanded.

Knowing I had failed to keep it a secret, I said, "I fell off the motorcycle."

She was afraid and upset. While scolding me, she wrapped my wound with gauze. I was glad my father wasn't at home. He would have also scolded me.

My mother said I could no longer ride a motorcycle.

## TIBETAN TERMS

'ba' rdzong འབའ་རྫོང་།

thub bstan 'jig med rnam rgyal ཐུབ་བསྐྱེད་འཇིག་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ་།

## HENOCH SCHONLEIN PURPURAC<sup>1</sup>

Thub bstan 'jig med rnam rgyal ཐུབ་བསྐྱེད་འཇིག་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ།  
(Tuodanjiumainanjie 托旦久买南杰)

Autumn 2015: I was nine and in grade three at the 'Ba' rdzong Nine-Year Ethnic Residential School. My home was near the school, and as a day student, I went home every day after school.

One afternoon, as the last class was about to end, I began to feel heavy and tired. I couldn't figure out what was wrong. When school finished, I grabbed my schoolbag and started walking home, which proved. My legs were weak, and my feet seemed as though they would likely soon be unable to carry me, but I kept forcing myself to walk.

When I reached the school gate, I started looking for my mother, but she hadn't come to pick me up that day. I sat on a large stone to rest for a few minutes and waited for her. As time passed, I stood and resumed walking home, leaning against the school's courtyard walls for support. I cried out for my mother, but she didn't come.

I was nearing home when I saw a woman in the distance. Thinking it was my mother, I called, "Mother! Mother!" but she didn't respond, so I guessed she hadn't heard me.

Eventually, I spotted my mother running. She looked worried and asked, "What's wrong with you?"

I was crying and barely able to speak. "I can't walk," I sobbed.

My mother immediately put me on her back and took me home. When we arrived, she was shocked to see my legs and arms covered in red dots. We didn't know what was happening, so my mother decided to take me to my grandparents. I wasn't sure why we had to go there, but my mother seemed in a hurry.

My grandparents were also scared. My mother didn't have a phone. We couldn't reach my father, so we had to wait for

---

<sup>1</sup> Thub bstan 'jig med rnam rgyal ཐུབ་བསྐྱེད་འཇིག་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ།  
(Tuodanjiumainanjie 托旦久买南杰). 2025. Henoch Schonlein  
Purpac. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:3652-367.

him to come home.

When darkness fell, I was exhausted. Something was pressing down on me, making it hard to breathe. Finally, when my father returned, my mother scolded him, and they took turns carrying me to a clinic. Most medical care facilities were closed, but we found an open one. A kind Chinese doctor saw we were very flustered. After a quick examination, he diagnosed my problem as an allergic reaction and said it was serious and required treatment in Zi ling City.<sup>1</sup> He added that he could give me an infusion to relieve the pain temporarily.

My parents agreed. After the infusion, I drifted off to sleep. When I woke up, my parents were still by my side. Though I felt a little better, I was still tired and in pain. We left the clinic and started our journey home by motorcycle.

The next morning, my mother got up early to prepare breakfast. I could hardly stand. My mother spoon-fed me parched barley flour and then had to go to work. After breakfast, my father and I boarded a bus to Zi ling. On the way, I saw another woman with the same red dots on her face and arms. I wondered if her problem was the same as mine.

Our journey took five hours. I was dizzy and exhausted and managed to sleep for a while. My father was worried and silent during the trip. When we eventually reached Zi ling, we took a taxi to the Tibetan Hospital. After a brief wait, a doctor examined me and said, "You have Henoch-Schönlein purpura. It is an autoimmune ailment commonly affecting children. It causes small, raised areas of bleeding underneath the skin, and there is often joint and abdominal discomfort. You need to be hospitalized."

The hospital admission fees were high. At that time, my family didn't even have a thousand RMB. My mother worked at a car wash. Luckily, her boss was a good woman and advanced my mother's wages, which allowed me to be admitted. I spent seven days in the hospital, receiving daily infusions. I lost my

---

<sup>1</sup> Capital city of Qinghai Province.



appetite and often vomited after eating what my father insisted I eat because it would help me recover.

By the fourth day, the red dots began fading, and I started to feel better. On the final day, I didn't need an afternoon infusion, so, my father took me shopping to cheer me up. That evening, we stayed in a hotel, and the next day, we began our journey back home.

The bus ride felt shorter on the way back because I felt better. When we reached 'Ba' rdzong County Town in the afternoon, my mother was overjoyed I had recovered.

A few days later, we consulted a diviner from our community, who suggested we perform a ritual making 10,000 *chang bu*<sup>1</sup> to subdue hindrances such as my illness. This task was challenging for us due to its relatively high expense and the limited number of people available to assist, but we completed it.

After everything returned to normal, I resumed my studies at school.

## TIBETAN TERMS

'ba' rdzong འབའ་རྫོང་།  
chang bu ཆང་བུ།

'grub thub 'chi med rdo rje\_\_  
grub thub 'chi med rdo rje  
skar ma thub bstan 'jig med rnam  
rgyal ལྷུང་བ་ཐུབ་འཇིག་མེད་རྡོ་རྗེ་རྒྱལ་།

tomtsho sngon zhing chen bod sman khang མཚོ་སྔག་ཤིང་ཅེན་བོད་སྐྱུང་ཁང་།  
zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།

## CHINESE TERMS

Qinghai 青海

Xining 西宁

---

<sup>1</sup> Barley flour dough pressed in the hand and what is extruded between the fingers is offered to ghosts.

## BRAG DKAR PASTORAL CHILDHOOD AND A MYE RMA CHEN 'ANIMAQING' PILGRIMAGE (2009)<sup>1</sup>

Dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐུབས། (Guangquijie 官却杰)

### BEGINNINGS

I entered this world in the auspicious Year of the Dragon in 2000 and spent my infancy with my paternal grandmother (Phyangs sgrol, 1945-2018), a loving figure in my life. When I was one year old, my parents divorced. Father remarried and settled in a different township. My biological mother also remarried, which I learned after I was older.

Grandmother and I then fended for ourselves, the sole occupants of our home in the winter pasture where we tended our sheep and yaks near Gnam thang (Nanmutang) Village, Brag dkar (Xinghai) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho snag (Qinghai) Province, China.

We did not migrate to our summer pasture because I was too young to help Grandmother move.

Grandmother had three sons (one of whom is a monk) and four daughters. All her children married, except for the monk.

Grandmother walked to a spring in the valley near our home and collected drinking water in a wooden bucket she carried home on her back.

A blue truck was Rtogs ldan dgon pa Monastery's <sup>2</sup> common property. A monastery's *bla ma* (Mkhyen rab rgya mtsho 1944-1993); my paternal grandfather) had financed the truck's purchase and built a house for his son, a monk, who lived

---

<sup>1</sup> Dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐུབས། (Guangquijie 官却杰). 2025. Brag dkar Pastoral Childhood and A mye rma chen Pilgrimage (2009). *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:368-381.

<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1919 by Grub thub 'chi med rdo rje and Rje btsun ngag dbang don 'grub, Rtogs ldan thub bstan bshad sgrub dar rgyas gling Monastery had twenty monks in 2024 and was thirty kilometers from Gnam thang Village.

at the monastery. Fetching water for house construction entailed covering a large plastic container in the back of the blue truck with plastic to ensure water did not splash out. Water was collected from the Rma chu (Yellow River) using a gasoline-powered pump that sent water through a plastic pipe into the container.

FIG 1. Our winter pasture home was built in 1992, the Year of the Monkey. Gcan tsha workers made the walls and painted the interior wood. House tiles were laid by Bstan lo he (a Mgo log native), who married a local woman (A chung) and lived nearby on Rtogs dgon pa Monastery property. Before the house pictured below was built, a small adobe house stood nearby and was home to seven people. In 2019, workers demolished that house.



FIG. 2. The courtyard walls had many bird nests. In summer, nestlings chirped, waiting for their mother to feed them. Grandmother often told me, "Keep away from the nests," and never let me harm them. A wooden pole behind, with an antenna, connected a solar panel that generated electricity for a TV inside the house. Before we used solar electricity, we had a gas generator that produced electricity for the TV.



As I grew older, I herded yaks and sheep with a slingshot that Grandmother made. My herding adventures included a yak charging at me. I dodged and fled. This was rare. Yaks were usually not aggressive unless provoked. Wild yaks were more aggressive.

Grandmother milked the yaks, collected yak dung for fuel, and managed household duties.

Father occasionally visited, which was difficult due to the rough terrain and limited transportation options. At that time, there were few motorcycles in our area.

When I was six, my paternal uncle returned from his layman's life to assist Grandmother with the livestock.

When I was seven, Father took my stepmother to the winter pasture and decided it was time for Grandmother to move to the monastery where her son resided. I was thrilled to accompany her because I could bid farewell to herding duties.

My uncle, the monastery abbot, took me under his wing and taught me basic Tibetan and math. Living in a small house near the monastery, I was exposed to basic teachings, rituals, monastic circumambulations, and rotating prayer wheels.

Later, Father decided it was time for me to return home. Stepmother was expecting a child and needed help with household chores, so I resumed tending livestock. Meanwhile,

Grandmother stayed at the monastery.

After my half-brother's birth, I returned to reside at the monastery.

Father gave me my first commercially purchased plastic toy with all twelve zodiac animals. He had purchased it in the County Town. It was my first store-bought toy.

Later, Father sold some sheep, so we acquired a TV and a gasoline-powered electricity generator, which provided us with occasional entertainment. I particularly enjoyed watching VCDs, such as *Journey to the West*<sup>1</sup> and *Genghis Khan*,<sup>2</sup> dubbed in Tibetan, which were very popular in my home community.

In 2008, Father took me to school during the Tibetan New Year celebrations, filling me with excitement. As we journeyed to Brag dkar County Town in a Zhangqi Utility Vehicle,<sup>3</sup> we got stuck in mud. Father's kind brother-in-law helped get us out and welcomed us into his home. My stay with his family was filled with warmth and hospitality. I reveled in the opportunity to watch TV and play with their children.

After a delightful two weeks, Father informed me that it was time I started school, where I quickly made friends and became busy with study. Despite the challenges of Tibetan language classes, I excelled in math and Chinese. My headteacher chose me as a group leader, an honor that gave me a sense of responsibility and authority. As class monitor, I was

---

<sup>1</sup> A television series in Chinese that ran from 1986 to 2000 set in China depicting Tang Sanzang who went to Central Asia and India from China to collect sacred Buddhist texts and bring them back to China

(<https://duckduckgo.com/?q=%22journey+to+the+west%22+tv+series&ia=web>, accessed 12 April 2025). This program was dubbed in Amdo Tibetan, which was the language version I watched.

<sup>2</sup> A thirty-episode TV series that began in 2004. I watched the Amdo Tibetan language version.

<sup>3</sup> Made by Beijing Auto Works (BAW) that was part of Beijing Auto Industrial Corporation. Production ran from 2005 to 2019 (<https://www.coolcarsinchina.com/2022/07/18/baw-zhanqi-bj2033chb1-is-a-cool-china-4x4-utility-vehicle/>, accessed 21 June 2024).

required to enforce discipline, even when it meant reprimanding my peers. Some students tried to bribe their way out of trouble, but I steadfastly upheld the rules. Playing with toys during class was strictly forbidden, and confiscated items were never returned.

## A MYE RMA CHEN 'ANIMAQING' PILGRIMAGE

In 2009, I was nine years old and in my second year of Chenguan Primary School. When the summer holiday came, I returned home. Father said we would go on pilgrimage to A mye rma chen with twelve people.

Table 1. The A mye rma chen pilgrimage group.

Name	Birthdate	Relationship to Me
Bsod nams grags pa	1979	father
Mkha mtsho skyid	1985	stepmother
Bsod nams dpa stobs	2002	brother
Dbang chen stobs rgyal	2003	brother
Dkon mchog skyabs	2000	self
Nor bzang skyid	1982	wife of Zla wa
Gangs mgon dar 'bum	1995	son of Zla wa and Nor bzang skyid
ShAkya seng ge	1985	son of Bsod nams grags pa's sister
Bzang dpal rdo rje	1989	half-brother of Bsod nams grags pa
Skar ma	1978	relative of Bzang dpal rdo; responsible for caring for Bsod nams dpa stobs and Dbang chen stobs rgyal, who were too young to prostrate
Bsod b+ha	b. ~1983	cook, tantric practitioner from Sngag mang, Reb gong

Bsod b+he	b. ~1984	cook, tantric practitioner from Sngag mang, Reb gong
-----------	----------	--

Several days later, two vehicles started from my home. Father and Bzang dpal rdo rje each drove a vehicle.<sup>1</sup> We spent one night in a hotel in Rta bo (Dawo) County, Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The next day, we arrived in Dgra dul, with many tents. We ate lunch in a tent restaurant in Rta mchog gong kha.

Locals asked, Where you from?

"Brag dkar County."

"What do you do here? Is this your first time here?"

"Yes. Today, we start prostrating around A mye rma chen."

Locals were happy to hear that and were very hospitable.

After lunch, we moved our belongings to a white Zhanqi car. Father asked the restaurant boss to watch the car until we finished prostrating and offered him 500 RMB, but he refused to take that money: "How can I take money from prostraters?" he said, covering the windshield with a big cloth and covering the wheels with old overcoats.

Skar ma began walking with my two brothers. The rest of us put on forehead covers and kneepads, held wood hand pads, and began prostrating.

Bsod b+ha and Bsod b+he drove the car to where we would stop and pitched a tent in preparation for cooking that evening.

Most people began prostrating in Dgra dul, regardless of whether they walked or rode a horse to circumambulate A mye rma chen.

We resumed prostrating after lunch and ate supper around six to seven p.m. After supper, if we were near a stream, we washed our clothes. We generally went to bed at around nine

---

<sup>1</sup> Both vehicles were white Zhanqi utility vehicles that cost about 60,000 RMB each.

p.m. The first day was very uncomfortable for me. My body ached, and I couldn't sleep well.

We got up between six to seven a.m. and had *rtsam pa* and tea. Lunch was from eleven to noon. Bsod b+ha and Bsod b+he prepared potatoes and cabbage and sometime,s we had bread, and tea. Fo dinner, we usually had meat noodles or vermicelli, and meat.

I continued prostrating, and some days later, I felt comfortable and could sleep well because I was exhausted. While prostrating, we saw herds of deer and packs of wolves. Chinese and Tibetan tourists gave us beverages, food, and some cash. Some Chinese people took photos with us.

Father contacted our family members twice weekly on the phone when a signal was available.

Gangs mgon dar 'bum's father came and picked him up fifteen days later because it was difficult for him to prostrate.

We continued prostrating on rainy days. In the rainy season, the road was often impassable, with countless ruts and pools of muddy slush.

We wore long pieces of plastic that Stepmother had cut into pieces that reached from our heads to our knees. On rainy days, we covered less distance.

My brothers and I had limited summer holidays, so we needed to finish our circuit. Rainy days made prostrating difficult because the roads were muddy and the ground slippery, but I thought it was fun because when prostrating, I slid for many meters while others tried to avoid sliding. I quickly went ahead for many meters and rested until the others caught up.

We couldn't prostrate on muddy roads because it made our clothes dirty, so we prostrated nearby on grass-covered ground.

After twenty days, we reached Mtshal nag kha mdo. There was no road between Mtshal nag kha mdo and Gus sku. Luckily, we had local relatives, so we left our car with them, borrowed some of their yaks, and packed our gear on the yaks. A relative gave us some bags of yak dung. The cooks had prepared



meals with bottled gas, but now switched to yak dung.

Mtshal nag kha mdo and Gus sku were about thirty kilometers apart. When we encountered deep rivers, we rode the yaks, which were very gentle when crossing the rivers. Father and other adults carried us across the rivers if the rivers were not deep.

We tied the yaks near our tents at night so they would not wander away. If they did so, they were hard to find.

We reached Gus sku three days later, and Skar ma drove the pack yaks back to our relatives' home and drove the car to meet us in Gus sku. We packed our gear in the car again.

When we finished our food, a cook drove to the nearest store and bought vegetables and other supplies. When there were no stores, he bought food at local homes. Some locals refused our money.

When we had almost finished prostrating, Father's sister's family contacted us before they reached Dgra dul, came on horseback, and stayed with us one night.

*Dam can bla rdo* are square stones with yellow flecks resembling gold. I thought these stones were gold, collected some small ones at lunchtime, and put them in my pockets, but lost them all while prostrating.

After twenty-three days, we reached Dgra dul in the morning. I was happy to have finished our prostrations. Uncle Nyi ma and Zla ba had arrived earlier. We had lunch together, said goodbye to the restaurant owner, went to Da wu County Town, stayed in a hotel for one day, and then returned home.

## RETURN HOME

Some days of holiday remained. When Grandmother visited us, she gave each of my brothers fifty RMB and told me to come to her home the next morning.

Grandmother circumambulated the temple in Brag dkar County Town every day. When I went to her home at eleven a.m. the next day, she had cooked lunch and was waiting for me. She

was delighted I had prostrated around A mye rma chen and was very proud of me. As we ate lunch together, she gave me 200 RMB and said, "Buy whatever you like, but don't tell your family I gave this to you."

Some other people also gave me cash rewards.

I told my classmates about my summer holiday after I returned to school, surprising and amazing them.

FIG 3. Lunch on the grassland. A cook pours milk tea. We ate *rtsam pa*, bread, and noodles for lunch. The cooks prepared four thermoses of milk tea for us. We were thirsty while prostrating. [1] Bsod b+ha, [2] Bsod b+he, [3] Snang skyid, [4] Nor bu skyid, [5] Dbang chen stobs rgyal, [6] Bsod nams dpal stobs, [7] Bsod grags, [8] Mkha' mtsho skyid, [9] Bzang dpal rdo rje, [10] ShakyA seng ge, and [11] Dkon mchog skyabs.





FIG 4. After lunch, we began prostrating on this road. The women wore white masks. I didn't wear a mask and avoided taking deep breaths. [1] ShakyA seng ge, [2] Mkha' mtsho skyid, [3] Bzang dpal rdo rje, [4] Bsod grags, [5] Dkon mchog skyabs, [6] Snang skyid, and [7] Nor bu mtsho.





FIG 5. This road was more comfortable and typical of most roads. [1] Dkon mchog skyabs, [2] ShakyA seng ge, [3] Bsod grags, [4] Mkha' mtsho skyid, and [5] Dzang dpal rdo rje.



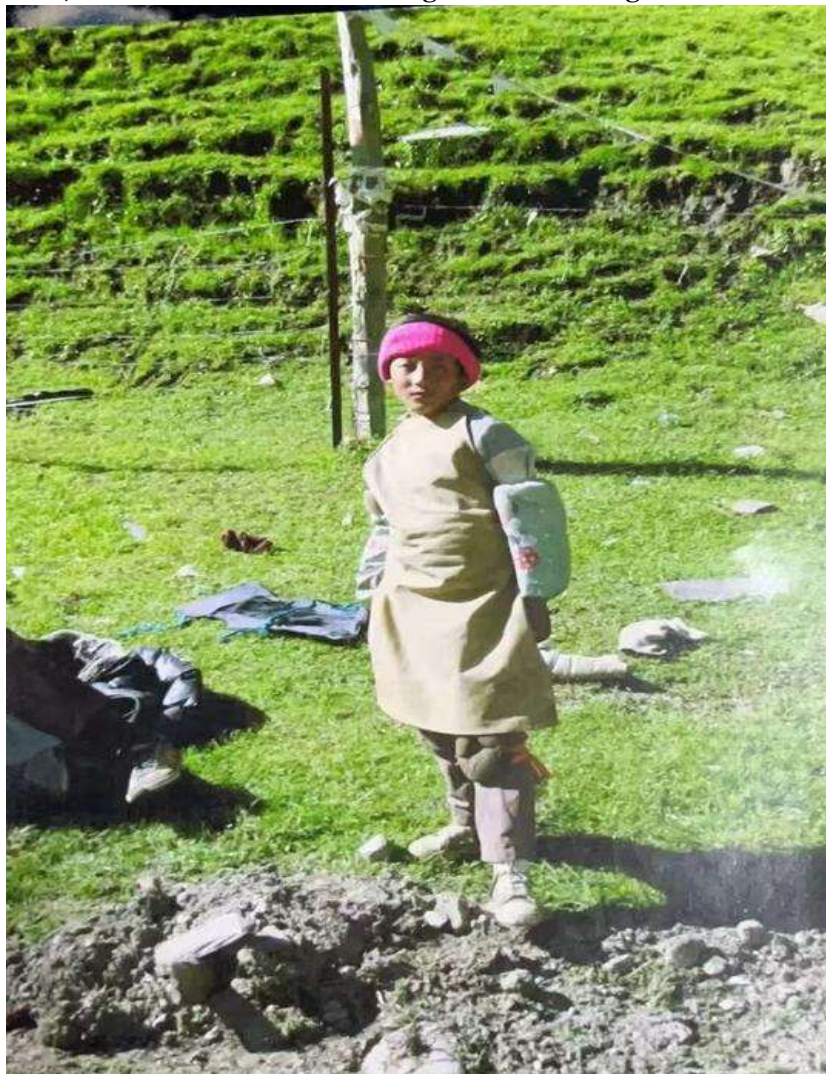




FIG 6. [1] Mkha' mtsho skyid, [2] Snang skyid, [3] Dsod grags, [4] Nor bu mtsho, [5] ShakyA seng ge, and [6] Dzang dpal rdo rje.



FIG 7. The author stands on the grassland during a break.



## TIBETAN TERMS

a mye rma chen ཨ་མྱེ་རྩ་ཆེན།  
bsod b+ha བསོད་ནཱ།  
bsod b+he བསོད་ནེ།  
bsod nams dpa stobs བསོད་ནཱས་དཔལ་སྟོབས།  
bsod nams grags pa བསོད་ནཱས་གྲགས་པ།  
bzang dpal rdo rje བཟང་དཔལ་རྡོ་རྗེ།  
zla ba ལྷ་བ།  
dbang chen stobs rgyal དབང་ཆེན་སྟོབས་རྒྱལ།  
dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྟེངས།  
gangs mgon dar 'bum གངས་མགོན་དར་འབྲུམ།  
gcan tsha གཅན་ཅ།  
gnam thang གནས་ཐང་།  
gnam thang sde ba གནས་ཐང་ལྗེ་བ།  
grub thub 'chi med rdo rje འབྲུབ་ཐུབ་འཛིན་རྡོ་རྗེ།  
mkha' mtsho skyid མཁའ་མཚོ་སྟིང་།  
nor bu skyid རྩ་བུ་སྟིང་།  
nor bzang skyid རྩ་བཟང་སྟིང་།  
nyi ma ཉི་མ།  
rje btsun ngag dbang don 'grub རྗེ་བཙུན་ངག་དབང་དོན་འབྲུབ།  
rtogs ldan thub bstan bshad sgrub dar rgyas gling  
རྟོགས་ལྡན་ཐུབ་བསྟན་བཟུང་དར་རྒྱས་གླིང་།  
shAkya seng ge སྤྲུལ་སེང་གེ།  
skar ma སྐར་མ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Animaqing 阿尼玛卿  
Dawo 大武  
Genghis Khan, Chenjisihan 成吉思汗  
Hainan 海南  
*Journey to the West, Xi You Ji* 西游记  
Nanmutang Cun 南木塘村  
Xinghai 兴海  
Zhanqi 战旗

## A REB GONG (TONGREN) VISIT AND KLU ROL<sup>1</sup>

Dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐུ་བཅས། (Guangquijie 官却杰)

The first time I went to Reb gong (Tongren) City with my paternal uncle monk, we went by car to the home of Uncle's sworn brother, Snying lcags, the son of Rdo rje. They are from Tho rgya Township. When Snying lcags was sixteen or seventeen, he came to Rtogs ldan dgon thub bstan bshad sgrub dar rgyas gling to study *thang ka* making. At that time, my uncle was about his age. They became sworn brothers. Uncle's father and Snying lcags' father were sworn brothers and had a strong relationship. Snying lcags helped my uncle's father paint *thang ka*.

We arrived at night, were offered a big dinner, and chatted late into the night.

I got up early the next morning. Uncle had gotten up earlier. I washed my face, ate breakfast, and realized Snying lcags' home was large, with a courtyard and many pear trees. Snying lcags painted *thang ka* in his home, which he showed us. Uncle and I decided to leave that day, but Snying lcags said we must stay another day because there would be a large activity.

The next day, many people wore Tibetan robes to the activities, and many travelers also attended.

We went to a monastery in the county town.

Around noon, I saw a man wearing a *kha gtags* on his chest and back. He had a mirror on his chest and was drinking liquor. Two men assisted him. A third man talked to him and translated what he was murmuring. The *lha ba* 'spirit medium' began shaking his hands and head, murmured, lifted the liquor bottle, and smashed his head, shocking everyone, including me.

He came in front of the local people, noticed a man not wearing a Tibetan robe, became enraged, took a stick, beat that man, and said, "Don't attend this activity unless you wear a Tibetan robe!"

---

<sup>1</sup> Dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐུ་བཅས། (Guangquijie 官却杰). 2025. A Reb gong (Tongren Visit and Klu rol. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:382-383.



The *lha ba*'s forehead was constantly bleeding. The *lha be* talked to the old man who had earlier translated for him and took the *lha ba* back to his home.

We returned to Snying lcags' where he removed his Tibetan robe. When I asked if the *lha ba* was OK, he said he would behave as if nothing had happened after a day.

I asked, "How many *lha ba* are in your village?"

"Three. I have seen some *lha ba* put a knife through their belly. The day after, they are fine."

I was shocked and said, "I want to come here next year at the same time."

"Welcome!"

We ate lunch together, and then Uncle and I started to return home. Snying lcags gave us some Reb gong bread, which is famous in my home area.

That visit was meaningful.

## TIBETAN TERMS

dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐྱབས།

kha gtags ཁ་གདགས།

lha ba ལྷ་བ།

rdo rje རྡོ་རྗེ།

reb gong རེབ་གོང་།

snying lcags སྤིང་ལྷགས།

thang ka ཐང་ཀ།

tho rgya ཐོ་རྒྱ།

## CHINESE TERMS

Tongren 同仁

## MEMORIES

DBANG CHEN TSHE RING དབང་ཆེན་ཚེ་རིང་།  
(Angqingcairang 昂青才让)<sup>1</sup>

1: TRAVEL TO LHA SA

In early autumn of 2022, I left home alone for the first time and went to Lha sa (Lasa) alone. It was during the time COVID-19 was spreading, but travel restrictions were few. My family worried about me and asked a local *bla ma* to do a divination. The result wasn't good. My family tried to persuade me not to go, but ultimately, they let me decide. Strange feelings compelled me to go to Lha sa.

My brother and I loaded my luggage into a car on an ordinary sunny afternoon. My mother tried to hold back her tears while helping me pack. My grandmother quickly turned her prayer beads, praying to a mountain deity or *bla ma* for my safety.

The sun shone beautifully, and everything around us was very quiet. I kissed Grandmother on the cheek and said goodbye to Mother. They both stood by the car window and told me to study hard. Mother couldn't hold back her tears, while Grandmother seemed to have said all she wanted to say through her prayer beads, which spun faster and faster.

That evening, Brother and I arrived in Zi ling (Xining) and stayed in a small hotel near the train station. That night, I experienced a sudden, severe toothache and could hardly sleep, possibly because I missed home. In the morning, my brother asked me to wait downstairs while he went to buy painkillers. He then escorted me to the train station, carefully explained how to take the train near the ticket office, and then I went through the gate.

The train station was crowded, but I still felt lonely. I got on the train. It passed Mtsho sngon po (Qinghai Lake) and crossed the long, empty land of Na gor mo (Ge'ermu). I bought a

---

<sup>1</sup> Dbang chen tshe ring དབང་ཆེན་ཚེ་རིང་། (Angqingcairang 昂青才让). 1: Travel to Lha sa; 2: Skipping School; 3: Brave Dog; 4: Mother's Gift; and 5: Earning Money. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:385-388.

cup of instant noodles but couldn't eat it, maybe because of the toothache, or maybe because I missed home. My heart felt so empty. I kept thinking of Mother. I wanted to send her a short video, but my phone had no signal. That night, I gazed out into the darkness from the window and wondered if my stubborn decision was the right one. I started to feel regretful.

## 2: SKIPPING SCHOOL

In 2019, I was studying at a vocational school in Rta bo (Dawu). We were allowed to go home every weekend. However, one day, the principal decided that local students could no longer go home on weekends because there were students from distant places in the school, and our going home negatively affected them, but it was just an excuse.

My neighbor's son, a student there, was very unhappy about this decision. One weekend, we decided to skip school. On the way to our homes, we bought two bottles of beer, drank them in a secluded spot where no one could see us, and then went to the highway to hitch a ride. Before long, a car stopped, so we got in and headed to Rta bo.

We were very excited. But halfway there, I told my older brother what we were doing. I thought he would understand, but instead, he got very angry. When we arrived in Rta Bo, he came to find us, took us to eat, and then drove us back to school that night.

He met the teachers. They said we should go home and return on Monday, so we left. My friend's family and mine tried to talk him into returning to school. On Sunday morning, I got ready to return to school, but my neighbor's son's family agreed to let him stay home.

That was my first time skipping school, and it was an adventure. I was lucky that my Brother took me back. I enjoyed being a herder but wanted to see the world beyond my family's grassland. Brother gave me that chance.

### 3: BRAVE DOG

It was 2017. I had dropped out of middle school and was staying at home. That year, a lot of stray dogs appeared in our community. Some attacked sheep and calves like wolves.

While herding the cattle home one afternoon, I saw a little yellow puppy on the road. He was weak. Perhaps the cattle mistook him for a wolf pup. They tried to gore him. I protected him, keeping him behind me. He followed me to my house.

At first, he was very scared of people. I secretly threw him a piece of lamb and he ate it clean. At first, my family didn't want to keep him, but over time, they started to like him. I named him Go go. My family said his ears were dry and he wouldn't grow tall. It was true. When he was three, he was only about half the size of a normal dog.

When I went to the mountains to herd cattle, he loved to come with me. I always brought a little food for him. My whole family liked him because he was cute and good at guarding our house. He was very brave, despite being small and weak. When there were wolves, he was the first to charge forward.

While I was in Lhasa, Mother told me he had been badly hurt by a pack of wolves and had died. Dogs often leave home quietly when they know they are about to die. He did the same. He dragged his injured body to a place we couldn't see and quietly passed away.

### 4: MOTHER'S GIFT

When I was very little, my mother once went to Mtsho lho (Hainan) Prefecture to buy things for Lo sar 'Tibetan New Year'. The night before she returned, my second-oldest brother and I were so excited, wondering what kind of food or toys she would bring us.

Early in the morning, while we were still half asleep, Mother called to us. When we opened our eyes, we saw her smiling kindly at the side of our bed. We immediately noticed her hands were behind her back. We jumped excitedly and asked, "What did you bring us?"

She pulled out two orange juice containers. The bottles were shaped like butterflies and could be worn around the neck. You could pull up the "head" of the bottle to drink from it and press it down to close it. We loved it! Later, we liked to pour milk tea into those bottles, hang them around our necks, and go out to play.

## 5: EARNING MONEY

In 2023, I was studying English in Lha sa. My family had a lot of loans because my brother was preparing to study in Japan, and we were also building a new house. The situation with our yaks wasn't good either, so we didn't have much money at home.

Luckily, I found a part-time job in Lha sa, where I worked every weekend. It paid 200 RMB each time.

One day, I called my mother and she told me they barely had any money to buy vegetables. I knew she was trying to encourage me not to waste my money, not asking me for money.

Hearing what she said made me feel really bad, and I wished I had known earlier. I immediately sent them 200 RMB through WeChat so they could buy food and snacks. Mother refused initially, but I lied and told her I was earning enough.

It was the first time I made money and spent it on something meaningful. I felt truly happy.

## TIBETAN TERMS

lha sa ལ་ས།  
mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྗོ་  
na gor mo ན་གོ་ར་མོ་  
zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།

mgo log མགོ་ལོག་  
mtsho sngon po མཚོ་སྒོན་པོ་  
rta bo རྟ་བོ་

## CHINESE TERMS

Dawu 大武  
Guoluo 果洛  
Lasa 拉萨  
Xining 西宁

Ge'ermu 格尔木  
Hainan 海南  
Qinghaihu 青海湖

G.YANG DKAR SGROL MA གཡང་དཀར་སྒོལ་མ།  
(Yanggezhuoma 羊格卓玛)<sup>1</sup>

1: THE DAY MY DONKEYS LEFT

I was ten and in the fourth grade of primary school. My family's two donkeys were grazing on a hill near my home at noon one summer. After a while, Father said, "Go drive our donkeys home from the hill."

I didn't know why and didn't ask, I just went.

Our donkeys were a mother and her daughter. The female donkey gave birth three times to one male and two females and was very gentle. She had been with our family for as long as I could remember. I drove her to graze daily. Sometimes, I even suspected that she could understand what I was saying. When I told her to stop, she stopped. When I told her to go, she would start off. She was gray, so we called her Bong rgan skya ril ma 'Gray Donkey'.

Her daughter was the same color but wasn't gentle. She had an eye problem, and her eyes constantly watered.

Gradually, the villagers stopped farming and started working elsewhere. Since donkeys were no longer useful, we sold them.

A Hui merchant visited our home and expressed interest in purchasing our donkeys. Father asked me to drive them home. I didn't understand what was going to happen.

Once I brought the donkeys home, I realized Father would sell them. I strongly objected, but was ignored, and our two donkeys were taken away.

I cried a lot. Mother said, "Don't worry. The Hui buyer said they won't be slaughtered. They'll be sold to other places where donkeys are needed, so you don't have to worry."

---

<sup>1</sup> G.yang dkar sgrol ma གཡང་དཀར་སྒོལ་མ། (Yanggezhuoma 羊格卓玛). 2025. 1: The Day My Donkeys Left; 2: Leaving Life to Dry; 3: Spilled Soup; 4: A Calf Scare; and 5: A Transformative Kick. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:389-393.

Still heartbroken, I followed the Hui buyer and watched as he drove our two donkeys into a large truck filled with many mules and donkeys he had purchased.

Our donkeys sensed something was wrong and were very reluctant to go into the truck.

I watched as the truck drove away, was very sad, and even wore some hair from the mother donkey's tail around my neck.

I had many memories with that donkey. She must be gone now because she was about my age.

## 2: LEAVING LIFE TO DRY

When I was eight, I often herded my family's two donkeys to the grassland at the bottom of a slope below our village, where a small spring flowed into a pond. The pond was filled with many frogs and tadpoles, and in spring, my friends and I spent the day playing while the donkeys grazed on the nearby slopes and grassy areas.

Nearby was a spot where villagers discarded waste. We picked up broken cups and other containers to use as toys. One day, I found a stainless-steel cup with small holes that could still hold water.

My friends and I used this cup to scoop up tadpoles from the pond, filling the cup with a dense mass of wriggling tadpoles. We placed the cup on a stone by the spring and went off to play.

We forgot about the cup and went home. When we returned the next day, all the water had leaked out, and the tadpoles had dried, filling me with fear and shock that I continue to relive today.

## 3: SPILLED SOUP

My parents had gone to work outside our community, so when I was eight, only my sister, grandmother, and I were home. I was crazy about playing with village kids, but Grandmother often did not let me go out because I returned home after dark.

I came back late because I was afraid Grandmother would scold me. Grandmother was very worried about me and



occasionally looked for me with some of our relatives at night when I had not returned.

The more Grandmother tried to stop me, the more I wanted to go and would secretly leave our home.

Even if Grandmother locked the door, I still snuck out. I didn't really know where to go, so I usually went to our village *ma Ni khang* where I would play with glass marbles, kick shuttlecocks, and enjoy many other games with village children in the yard there.

I didn't know what I was after; I just played all day. At noon and evening, the other children returned to their homes for meals, but since I had escaped, I didn't dare go home even if I was hungry. I waited for them to return so we could resume our play.

Meanwhile, Grandmother worried and sometimes came looking for me.

One day, Grandmother told me not to run away because I could go out to play that day. Our only donkey was pregnant, and Grandmother had cooked wheat soup, told me to take a large basin of soup to the donkey, and after it had eaten it all, I could go play. I was delighted and took the soup to the yard to feed the donkey.

Because there was a large amount of soup and the donkey ate very slowly, I became impatient, poured the remaining soup on the ground, took the empty basin back to Grandmother, and said, "The donkey finished eating."

Grandmother replied, "So fast?" but permitted me to go play.

When I returned, Grandmother scolded me and demanded, "How could you do this? Why didn't you let the donkey finish the soup? It's so bad!"

I felt guilty.

#### 4: A CALF SCARE

My parents had gone to the County Town one sunny afternoon when I was seven. Only Grandmother and I were at home. Grandmother was doing something inside while I played alone in our yard. Suddenly, I noticed a black calf with short horns lingering near our yard gate, wanting to enter.

"Go away!" I tried, shooing it away with a small stick.

The calf had other ideas, became feisty, and suddenly charged at me, repeatedly tossing me into the air and to the ground with its horns.

Something silly and fearless possessed me. When it charged again, I tried to climb onto its back like a tiny cowboy. My terrified screams brought Grandmother running. She cried, "My girl! My girl!" and chased the calf away.

I felt dizzy and fainted.

When I regained consciousness, my parents were home. Although my head ached, they had brought me snacks, which made me feel better.

After that incident, I feared cattle and yaks, especially when they stared at me.

Another cow charged me a few years later. Luckily, I dodged it.

This similar encounter reinforced that childhood fear and is an experience I relive more often than I would like.

#### 5: A TRANSFORMATIVE KICK

I studied at my village primary school in the fourth grade. There were eight children in my class. Teachers liked me because my grades were a bit better and gave me some small responsibilities, such as asking other classmates to recite texts. This made other classmates afraid of me, even though I was short and didn't seem threatening.

Most students supported me when I had conflicts with other classmates, and gradually, I became the so-called "most powerful" person among them.

At that time, I was truly naughty. Classmates gave delicious food and other items to please me, which I took for granted and even bullied them.

One day, I bullied a classmate. I went home for lunch and then started back to school. It was raining, and water flowed down the concrete road. I strolled along the road back to school in my rainboots, playfully kicking at the water, enjoying myself.

Suddenly, the grandfather of the girl I had bullied came toward me with an angry expression, kicked me to the road, where I sat with my butt in the water, and declared, "If you dare bully my granddaughter again, I'll beat you up!"

Afterward, I dared not bully her.

Upon reflection, I realized I was a bad girl and deserved what happened that day.

#### TIBETAN TERMS

bong rgan skya ril ma བོང་རྒན་སྐུ་རིལ་མ།  
g.yang dkar sgrol ma གཡང་དཀར་སྒྲོལ་མ།  
ma Ni khang མ་ཏི་ཁང་།

#### CHINESE TERMS

Hui 回

LCAGS MTSO RGYAL ལྷགས་མཚོ་རྒྱལ།  
(Jicuoja 吉措加)<sup>1</sup>

1: 2021 EARTHQUAKE NIGHT

I was a freshman and visited my friend's apartment one night to chat. We spent hours recalling our middle school days. Finally, we went to bed. Strong shaking jolted me awake. Shouts of "Run fast! Move quickly!" echoed outside.

Realizing it was an earthquake, we grabbed our clothes and phones and rushed to the playground. All the students huddled together for warmth, sharing emotions about the earthquake. In those moments, I didn't want it to be there and die.

After two hours with no further danger, we returned to our dorms to sleep. That night was my first unforgettable experience of an earthquake.

2: LESSON IN LYING

We often made yogurt in the summer pasture. To make *chur ba*, we needed to mix milk with yogurt. One afternoon, my brother and I stayed home while he prepared to make *chur ba* and I did some housework.

He asked, "Should we boil all this yogurt?"

I answered, "Yes," though I wasn't sure.

Mother wanted to make yogurt the next day, so needed some fresh yogurt to mix with milk, but there was none. She asked me, "Do you know where the yogurt went?"

I lied, "Brother boiled all of it. I told him to save some, but he said it was fine."

In reality, I had never warned him.

Mother and Brother discussed the incident some days later, and she realized I had lied. When he returned home, she pointed out the harm of dishonesty.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lcags mtsho rgyal ལྷགས་མཚོ་རྒྱལ། (Jicuoja 吉措加). 2025. 1: Earthquake Night; 2: Lesson in Lying; 3: A Bloody Tumble; 4: Child Wedding; and 5: Anticipating Lo sar. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:394-396.

Afterward, I never lied again. I realized the truth eventually emerges.

### 3: A BLOODY TUMBLE

Ten years ago, my grandmother and I went to the summer pasture to herd livestock during the day and returned to the winter pasture at night. Sometimes Father or Mother came to pick us up.

One day, when we arrived home, I heard my younger brother crying. I rushed inside and was shocked to see blood pooling on the ground.

Grandmother and Mother soon arrived, held up my brother, and cleaned the room.

When he finally stopped crying, they asked what had happened. He said he'd fallen off his chair while watching TV and hit his head on the corner of a table behind him.

Today, he has a bald scar there.

### 4: CHILD WEDDING

I often herded when I was a child. Many children played together during that time. I usually played with Gnam mtsho, Mkhar mtsho skyid, and Gyang sgron mtsho. They were older than me and organized fun games. One day, we all wore traditional Tibetan clothing and pretended to have a wedding. The two main roles were the groom and the bride. We sang and danced at our "ceremony."

Two years later, I started school while my childhood friends stayed at home for a few years, eventually married, and had one or two children.

This Tibetan New Year, I met Gnam mtsho at a local wedding. She had aged a lot.

## 5: ANTICIPATING LO SAR

As a child, I eagerly looked forward to Lo sar 'Tibetan New Year'.

During our winter holiday, a month before New Year, I constantly counted the days before Lo sar would come.

That month, my parents took my brother and me to our county town to buy new clothes and candy for the festival.

We weren't allowed to wear the new clothes until the New Year, so I would often stare at them quietly and then put them away.

I now realize this anticipation was precious to me as a child, motivating me to prepare for the New Year.

## TIBETAN TERMS

chur ba རྒྱུ་བ།

gnam mtsho གནམ་མཚོ།

g.yang sgron mtsho གཡང་སྒྲོན་མཚོ།

lcags mtsho rgyal ལྷགས་མཚོ་རྒྱལ།

lo sar ལོ་སར།

mkhar mtsho skyid མཁར་མཚོ་སྐྱིད།

## BKRA SHIS RGYA MTSHO བཀྲ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措)<sup>1</sup>

### 1: TREE PLANTING

One warm spring day, everything was still grey as winter lingered. Our pasture had no forest, only low, shrubby plants like tamarisk and rhododendrons. Around that time, local leaders devised a plan for each family to plant small willow trees near their enclosures or in front of their houses.

Several families had already begun planting willow saplings behind black yak-hair tents or in front of small adobe homes. My father also brought home some saplings. My younger brother and I helped our mother plant them about half a kilometer from our family enclosure, near a public path. It was my first time planting trees or even being around them.

The source of our potable water was a spring three kilometers from our home. Mother fetched water in a large bucket two or three times daily.

On warm spring days, melting ice occasionally sent dirty water flowing near our home, but that didn't happen often.

Mother dug small holes with our hoe. One of us then placed a tree in each hole and another covered its lower part with soil, and added a scoop of water from the bucket. After planting, my brother and I visited the trees daily to see if they were growing.

Our family moved to the summer pasture a month later. When we returned a month later in autumn, half of the trees had sprouted leaves, and the others had died. Our sheep liked to nibble on the leaves, so we often had to chase them away from the young trees.

Our family moved to a different winter pasture the following spring, and no one remained to care for or water the trees. They all eventually withered.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bkra shis rgya mtsho བཀྲ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (Zhaxijiancuo 扎西尖措). 2025. 1: Tree Planting; 2: Banditry; 3: Death of a Yak; 4: Horse with a Broken Leg; and 5: Meatless Bones. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:397-401.

Only one family's trees were still alive a couple of years later. That family stayed home year-round and continued to tend them. They had planted their trees in a small yard in front of their adobe house. The household consisted of an elderly couple who were unable to move to the summer pasture, especially the old man, who was disabled.

## 2: BANDITRY

My family rarely lived with my maternal grandparents, so I had limited experiences of being around them. But one autumn, we were together on our pasture, and I went with Grandfather to herd our sheep in the mountains.

On a high mountaintop, Grandfather shared a story from his life. When he married Grandmother, her family owned 2,000 sheep and 700 yaks.

Our region's tradition was that, regardless of how rich or poor your family was, you were expected to steal livestock from a neighboring tribe to provide meat for summer or winter. People thought you weren't brave and denigrated you among your peers if you didn't.

One summer day, Grandfather and one of his friends hid on a mountaintop and observed a neighboring tribe's camp. They waited the entire day and snuck into the tribe's livestock enclosure that night. They stole six male yaks and returned home at midnight.

The next day, they slaughtered one yak for their family and one yak for my family. They shared the remaining four with other camp neighbors.

That, he said, was our custom for proving your bravery.



### 3: DEATH OF A YAK

My family had a large, pale-yellow male yak that was very tame. Whenever we moved from one pasture to another, our parents packed him with baskets, including baskets with the young children of our family.

While we were traveling near Klu mtsho chu 'Stream of Ocean Naga', the yak leaned over to drink water and suddenly lost balance. Our baskets tipped over, and we were thrown into the stream. Fortunately, Father rushed over and pulled us out. Meanwhile, the yak stood calmly, as if nothing had happened.

We were soaked from head to toe.

Time passed and we reached our autumn pasture, where our pale-yellow yak fought with a neighbor's yak. Our yak's belly was badly torn. A few hours later, our yak collapsed and died near another family's tent. While our parents were skinning and cooking the meat, my brother and I were angry with the neighbor's yak and refused to eat any of the yak's meat that day.

Our parents shared a portion of meat with the family owning the other yak.

Later, the neighbor's family noticed we were upset and gave us candies to comfort us. Our parents gently reminded us that we were neighbors and must treat each other kindly and with understanding. They told us the other yak didn't hurt ours purposely. Conflicts like this sometimes happen and we needed to learn to accept what happened. They reminded us that our yaks or dogs might harm other families someday.

In our community, we didn't blame each other for such things. Instead, we recited the Six Sacred Syllables to bring peace to our yak's soul and guide him on his lonely journey. We believed he would be reborn into a good life in his next existence.

#### 4: HORSE WITH A BROKEN LEG

My brother and I noticed a horse with a broken right hind leg near our family's land. We didn't know who the owner was. The horse seemed to have been wandering around our pasture like a stray for several days.

Its broken leg was nearly severed, and worms wiggled in the open wound. We pitied it and told Mother we wanted to help it recover.

Mother said:

རྟ་ཆག་ལ་འབྱུར་ནི་མེད། rta chag la 'byor ni med No broken horse recovers  
མྱ་ཆག་ལ་ཤི་ནི་མེད། myi chag la shi ni med No broken person dies

and explained that a horse didn't understand how to care for a broken bone, while people could care for themselves and heal.

No one did anything for the horse. It stayed around our area for a while and eventually disappeared. We never learned where it went.

#### 5: MEATLESS BONES

Elders follow certain rules whenever they eat meat. One is to clean the meat completely off the bones. When bandits followed merchants in the past, they inspected bones left at a camp. If the bones were picked clean, they believed a brave and disciplined person was among the merchants. But if bones with meat were left, they said, "It doesn't matter if we take their goods."

Another important value we were taught was never to waste an animal's life. Every part of a slaughtered animal should be used, including the meat, skin, and even the bones. For example, people used yak horns to make women's decorative pegs that hang in front of them. To do otherwise meant that taking a life was meaningless because life was more precious than anything, even the lives of animals. Wasting it was wrong.

There's also a tradition about eating marrow from a yak's or sheep's femur. While adults may enjoy it, children are not

allowed to eat it. Elders believe it is too oily and may dull a child's intelligence and warn gently:

བུ་གཅེས་པ་རྐང་གིས་མ་གསོ། bu gces pa rkang gis ma gso Beloved child, do not  
be fed marrow  
ཁྱི་ཕུག་རུས་པས་མ་གསོ། khyi phrug rus pas ma gso Young pups should not  
gnaw on bones.

## TIBETAN TERMS

bkra shis rgya mtsho བཀྲ་ཤིས་རྒྱ་མཚོ།  
bu gces pa rkang gis ma gso, khyi phrug rus pas ma gso  
བུ་གཅེས་པ་རྐང་གིས་མ་གསོ། ཁྱི་ཕུག་རུས་པས་མ་གསོ།  
klu mtsho chu ལྷ་མཚོ་ཅུ།  
rta chag la 'byor ni med, myi chag la shi ni med  
རྟ་ཆག་ལ་འབྱོར་ནི་མེད། མྱི་ཆག་ལ་ཤི་ནི་མེད།

**BDE SKYID SGROL MA** བདེ་སྒྱུད་སྒྲོལ་མ།  
(Dejizhuoma 德吉卓玛)<sup>1</sup>

**1: KIDNAPPERS**

When I was a fourteen-year-old middle school student, most of my classmates feared ghosts and enjoyed listening to ghost stories at school. Some boys deliberately told ghost stories to scare girls. For example, they said that at night, when students went to the toilet, strange things would happen because there was a ghost-like woman in the toilet who wore white clothes and had loose hair. And when you went to the toilet, she would touch your buttocks with her hand. Other classmates said our school was once a burial ground, so many ghosts were said to appear and wander around at night.

I was never afraid of ghosts, but I was extremely fearful of kidnappers because a student from our school was kidnapped when I was in middle school and was never found, despite the school and his family's searches.

I developed a strong fear of strangers and never interacted with them.

One Sunday during my primary school days, Cousin and I encountered a middle-aged stranger who started following us on our way to school. At first, we didn't notice, but he was waiting for us after we bought notebooks and snacks and came out of a shop. He reached out, grabbed my cousin, and began asking questions, such as where our family lived, which school we attended, what our parents did for a living, and how old we were.

Innocent and naïve, my cousin answered truthfully while gripping my hand, sensing something was wrong. The stranger held my cousin's other hand and said in a seemingly friendly but suspicious way that he would like to take us back into the store and buy us some delicious snacks.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bde skyid sgrol ma བདེ་སྒྱུད་སྒྲོལ་མ། (Dejizhuoma 德吉卓玛). 2025. 1: Kidnappers; 2: School Phobia; 3: Special Teacher, Special Rewards; 4: A New Year Accident; and 5: First Salary. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:402-408.

Cousin, excited by the prospect of free treats, readily followed him. My strong sense of unease made me hesitate, but I couldn't persuade Cousin not to follow the stranger. The man bought us many snacks, but I resolutely refused to eat any.

Next, the stranger proposed taking us to a fun place. Cousin was all too eager to go, but I firmly refused and pulled Cousin's hand, saying, "Let's go to school right now."

Cousin didn't want to leave and continued to be enticed by the stranger. I was terrified, my heart pounded, I started crying, and I desperately begged Cousin to agree that we should go to school. Finally, Cousin agreed to come to school with me.

The next Friday, I was shocked to find the same stranger waiting at the school gate after classes ended. I was filled with terror, and believed he was waiting for us. Fortunately, he didn't seem to notice me, perhaps because all the students were wearing school uniforms, which made it difficult to single me out.

When I got home, I told my parents every detail of what had happened. I expected them to be as shocked as I was, but to my disappointment, they didn't seem to believe me. They thought I was making up a story. From that moment on, my fear of human traffickers intensified.

Later, I moved to Xi'an City, the first time I had left my hometown and come to a completely new city. I rented an apartment with some of my classmates. Once, as the winter vacation approached, most classmates decided to return home. Only one classmate and I were left in the apartment.

One night, my classmate told me that she probably wouldn't be coming back that night and reminded me to lock the door carefully. I was scared at being alone in the apartment. I took all the shoes from the shoe cabinet and placed them at the door to feel safer. I hoped that if bad guys came, they would think many people lived in the apartment and leave. With that thought in mind, I tried to go to sleep and managed to calm down. At around two a.m., my friend returned, knocked on my bedroom door, and asked me who else was in the room. I told her it was just me. Then she said, "Whose shoes are those outside?"

I explained I had put them there to scare away bad guys. She laughed and said she had never met such a timid person.

## 2: SCHOOL PHOBIA

I studied at a boarding school in Rebong County. We had to stay at school from Monday to Friday.

We could go home Friday afternoon and then return to school Sunday afternoon. During the weekend, we usually bought notebooks, pens, bread, and tissues for Monday through Friday and then took them to school. We didn't know how to keep track of the date of our menstruation, and no one told us how to pay attention to this.

Sometimes we forgot to buy sanitary napkins, and at other times we bought them in advance as preparation. When we suddenly started menstruating, we borrowed sanitary napkins from classmates or used tissues.

Once, during math class, I felt that my menstruation was coming, but I didn't dare tell the teacher. So, I just sat there enduring it. Later, I felt more and more pain, lowered my head from time to time, and tried to focus on the class content.

When the teacher noticed my behavior, she thought I wasn't paying attention and asked me to stand and answer the question she had asked. I couldn't answer, so the teacher told me to stand at the back of the classroom.

I didn't stand up. I just sat and said nothing with my head lowered. The teacher repeated herself. I ignored her because my school uniform pants were now stained with menstrual blood. I was afraid my classmates would laugh at me, so I just sat.

The teacher approached me angrily, slapped me, and said, "Why don't you listen? Are you deaf?"

Then she announced she didn't want to teach our class because the students ignored her. She left in a rage and said she wouldn't teach our class again.

Later, our monitor told me to apologize to the teacher. I didn't. I didn't know what to say and was afraid to meet her. Then

the head teacher learned about what had happened and scolded me.

The head teacher and several classmates, including the monitor and study committee member, went to the math teacher's office and pleaded with her to teach our class.

Later, the relationship between our math teacher and me continued to deteriorate. She disliked me and ignored me in class. It was as if I didn't exist as a student. I felt very uncomfortable. I felt uncomfortable in every math class.

Later, I told my parents I didn't want to go to school because I was unhappy, didn't like math, and didn't want to attend her class.

My parents were very angry. Father picked up a dictionary and threw it at my head. The dictionary broke into two pieces.

Mother hit me with a fire scoop and said, "Why don't you want to go to school? It's such a nice, comfortable place. Is it really difficult for you to sit in a classroom and study? Do you want to be like us and work very hard every day?"

That was the first time I experienced school as a place where no one understood me.

### 3: SPECIAL TEACHER, SPECIAL REWARDS

My most extraordinary teacher was in the second grade of primary school and in his fifties. He wore a neat black suit and brown glasses with thick lenses, which made him look quite learned. He was our Tibetan language teacher.

His gentle demeanor was evident in every aspect of his teaching. He never raised his voice at the students, let alone scolded or physically punished them. He was not like other teachers. Other teachers had a long stick they put on their desk and used it to frighten us, saying that they would hit disobedient students' hands or buttocks with that stick.

After marking our mid-term exam, he walked into our classroom with our test papers in one hand and a bag in the other. We didn't know what was in the bag. He handed out the test

papers. I scored a little over seventy points. Then he gave each of us a cute, frog-shaped candy with a sweet smell that made our mouths water.

He also awarded the top three students an extra piece of candy, a beautiful notebook, and a high-quality pen.

What surprised me even more was that he also awarded awards to the three students with the lowest scores. They received the same candy, notebooks, and pens as the top students.

This took me aback because most teachers focused on the top students and ignored those with low scores. He was different, not seeming to care very much about marks. He wanted to encourage every student in the class.

His teaching style was unique. He wanted every student to feel valued and encouraged. He taught our class for a year, and I never saw him again.

#### 4: A NEW YEAR ACCIDENT

The thirteenth to fifteenth days of the New Year held special significance. Everyone went to the monastery, spun prayer wheels, and kowtowed to each Buddha image. Those days were filled with a unique atmosphere of festivity and religious devotion. We wished everyone in the world peace, happiness, and good health.

I was nine. It was the thirteenth day of the New Year, and our home bustled with guests. My family was the only one among all our relatives at that time who had a house in Reb gong County Town.

During this period, relatives would come to our home. Some parked their motorcycles in our yard. The many guests filled our home and yard with chatter and laughter.

That morning, our house was packed with people. There were adults and also many children scurrying about.

The house was so crowded with guests that the adults sent the children outside, so my cousins and I played on the rooftop. I was wearing a pair of special red leather shoes that



were extremely slippery. We had much fun running around and chasing each other on the rooftop.

I suddenly lost my balance, slipped, and tumbled from the rooftop.

I gradually regained consciousness, and I found myself lying in a hospital bed, and then pain washed over me. My entire face was swollen. I could feel that my teeth were loose. There was a metallic taste of blood in my mouth, which was so swollen it was hard to open.

The first thing I saw was Grandmother sitting by me. She chanted scriptures, her voice filled with worry and hope, and said I was truly lucky because, despite the fall, none of my limbs were broken. I was relieved to hear that, but the pain from my injuries made me wince.

I returned home after a few days in the hospital, though my mouth was still painfully swollen. I couldn't eat hot food. Every time I tried to take a bite of something warm, sharp pain shot through my mouth.

Mother often said I fell from the rooftop because the Dharma protector was punishing me. After all, I didn't want to go to the monastery but preferred to stay home and play with my cousins.

Since then, I have been extremely cautious about expressing such thoughts and have always visited the monastery with my family.

## 5: FIRST SALARY

It was my first part-time job. I worked in a coffee shop from eleven a.m. to nine p.m., earning eighteen RMB per hour. The coffee shop had many customers, so we were busy except for a half-hour lunch break.

After a long workday, I squeezed onto a crowded bus back to my dormitory. It was Father's Day. Those around me were chatting and laughing. Some held gifts, which made me think more about my father. I took out my phone and opened WeChat. When I scrolled through Moments, I saw people expressing love

for their fathers. Some posted warm photos with their dads, while others wrote touching words expressing their love.

I decided to transfer 200 RMB to my father. I realized Father did not know anything about Father's Day. Nevertheless, I still wanted to show my love. I sent him a message, saying I hoped he would use the money to buy something he really liked.

We rarely celebrated festivals other than the Lunar New Year, a time for the whole family to gather, with lots of delicious food and a festive atmosphere. Other traditional festivals were also important, but we didn't celebrate Father's Day, Mother's Day, or birthdays.

However, such special times were becoming popular for some young people to celebrate.

Father's Day was the day I received a salary payment. The coffee shop manager was kind and amiable, and after we finished work, he handed us our salaries. I felt a sense of accomplishment and pride, and thought about Father, who had worked hard for years to support our family.

I imagined Father was really surprised when he received the money. He said he didn't need it and asked me to keep it because I was working hard and needed money for my expenses. I insisted he take it as a token of my love for him.

On the way back to the dormitory by bus that day, the bus moved slowly through the busy streets. I was lost in thought. I felt warmth inside. Although the 200 RMB wasn't large, I realized it expressed my deep love for Father and was a small step to show my gratitude and love for him.

## TIBETAN TERMS

bde skyid sgrol ma བདེ་སྦྱིང་སྒྲོལ་མ།  
reb gong རེབ་གོང་།

THUB BSTAN 'JIG MED RNAM RGYAL ཐུབ་བསྟན་འཇིག་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ།  
(Tuodanjiumainan jie 托旦久买南杰)<sup>1</sup>

1: DOCTORING A BIRD

I was twelve and really liked playing with a cousin who was a year younger. One day, after lunch, we played outside when he said he had found a bird that was still breathing. The bird was dead from the cold, but we didn't know that.

We wanted to save it and found an old intravenous (IV) drip in the trash. Cousin said we could use it to save the bird. I agreed. The IV bag was empty, so we filled it with water. We decided the needle was important, and all we needed to revive the bird was to stick it into its body.

We took the bird behind our house and began our rescue. We placed some straw on the ground, put the bird on top, hung the IV bag up high, and inserted the needle into the bird's belly, tying it in place with a string. Then we went off to play, completely forgetting the bird.

The next day, we suddenly remembered and ran to check. We found the bird's belly swollen. We were scared our parents would punish us, so we put the bird on the house roof.

2: A DOG AND FIRECRACKERS

A small, fierce dog with thick white fur and black patches appeared in our community and bit several people in a few days after its arrival. Cousin and I were too scared to go outside. Many locals knew about the dog and feared it. It became infamous in our community.

One day, Cousin was bitten by the dog when we went to a local shop. The dog rushed at my cousin's leg. I kicked the dog

---

<sup>1</sup> Thub bstan 'jig med rnam rgyal ཐུབ་བསྟན་འཇིག་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ། (Tuodanjiumaainan jie 托旦久买南杰). 2025. 1: Doctoring a Bird; 2: A Dog and Firecrackers; 3: Grandmother, Where Are You?; 4: A Five-Stitch Slide, and 5: Bottle Collecting for Candy. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:409-411.

hard several times, and then we ran to the yard of our house, locking the gate from the inside.

Fortunately, Cousin wasn't seriously hurt.

A month later, one of our neighbors adopted the dog, and kept it on a leash at their door so it couldn't bite anyone.

One day, Cousin and I decided to get revenge. We bought some firecrackers and climbed to the top of our house from where we could see the dog near our neighbor's house. We lit the firecrackers and tossed them at the dog. We quickly got down from the roof and laughed when we heard the dog's frantic barking.

### 3: GRANDMOTHER, WHERE ARE YOU?

When I was a kindergarten student, my grandmother took me to school. I started crying if I did not see her through the classroom window, so Grandmother stood outside and watched me through the window during class time to keep me calm.

One day, Grandmother and one of our relatives took me to school. I kept checking through the window every few minutes to be sure Grandmother was there. At first, everything seemed fine, but after a while, I realized that the person standing outside wasn't Grandmother, it was our relative.

I cried very loudly, so the teacher took me to Grandmother. When I saw her, I stopped crying and went home with her.

### 4: A FIVE-STITCH SLIDE

Cousin and I were getting ready to go home one day after class when I was in the second grade of primary school. We were both day students, so we went home together every day after school. Our classroom was on the third floor, and as we walked down the stairs, we noticed that no other students were around. So, Cousin sat on the staircase handrail and started sliding down.

He lost his balance and fell, but fortunately, he managed to grab the handrail, which stopped his fall. However, the lower edge of his mouth hit the corner of a stair step and split open. He

started crying. A lot of blood was on his mouth and neck. I picked him up and ran to find a teacher. Finally, he was sent to the hospital.

He had a big scar on the lower part of his mouth when he returned home from the hospital. He reported the doctor had used five stitches to close the wound.

## 5: BOTTLE COLLECTING FOR CANDY

When I was seven, Grandmother and I would go up a hill in our community to collect bottles. Sometimes, she carried me on her back while we searched. Whenever I asked her to buy me candy, she said, "We can buy candy when we sell some bottles and make some money."

Every day, I waited for my candy.

One sunny day, Grandmother and I went bottle collecting again. We walked for a long time and eventually came to an abandoned yard on a hill. A metal gate was much taller than me, and it was too difficult for me to climb over it. Grandmother told me to wait outside while she climbed over the gate to go inside.

I waited and eventually fell asleep. When I woke up, Grandmother hadn't returned. I tried to climb the gate and looked right and left for her, but she was nowhere to be seen. I thought she had abandoned me. Tired and frightened, I began crying loudly.

Grandmother finally returned and climbed back over the gate, looked at me, and I stopped crying. She comforted me. She had collected many bottles and promised to buy me a lot of candy.

## TIBETAN TERM

Thub bstan 'jig med rnam rgyal ཐུབ་བསྟན་འཇིག་མེད་རྣམ་རྒྱལ་

## DBYANGS CAN SKYID དབངས་ཅན་གྱིད། (Yangjijie 羊吉姐)<sup>1</sup>

### 1: BROKEN PENCIL TIP

My mother gave birth to me when she was nineteen in an adobe house. She said she was embarrassed after giving birth because our home was at a crossroads in the summer pasture. She hid when people passed by because she had given birth at a young age and was afraid of what others might say.

She did not regret my arrival. She loved me very much.

When I could walk, I helped the family herd. I worked hard herding, running after the cattle and sheep all day, and sometimes crying while herding. When I reached school age, I couldn't go to school because my younger brother had not yet been born. I was an only child. My family wanted me to stay home and herd.

I longed to attend school and felt envious of other children who did go to school. Every time my cousin came home from school, I watched him write. He liked to sharpen his pencil to a long, sharp point that easily broke when he wrote. Whenever I saw this, I immediately picked up the broken tip from the ground and scribbled everywhere, imagining that I was writing too. Later, my father taught me the Tibetan alphabet and read books at home.

I was able to start school when I was almost nine, and because I could read written Tibetan, I skipped a grade.

I am very grateful my parents decided to send me to school, allowing me to experience a life beyond herding.

### 2: BRIGHT MOON

I attended the village school for three years and stayed nearby at my uncle's house. Each morning, I walked along a winding path from my uncle's home to the school, crossing a narrow bridge

---

<sup>1</sup> Dbyangs can skyid དབངས་ཅན་གྱིད། (Yangjijie 羊吉姐). 2025. 1: Broken Pencil Tip; 2: Bright Moon; 3: Watchful Wolf; 4: My Favorite Yak; and 5: Grandfather's Radio. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:412-415.

over a river. I was always the first student to arrive because I was timid and afraid the teacher might scold me if I was late.

One morning, I woke up and found my room glowing brightly. I could see everything as clearly as if it were day. Panicked, I thought, "I'm going to be late!"

Without checking the clock, I grabbed a piece of bread my grandma had made and dashed out the door.

As I rushed past, my grandfather called, "You should eat something before school!"

I shouted back, "I'm already late!"

I was on the verge of tears and felt a lump in my throat. I resented Grandfather for not waking me up like he usually did.

The village was unusually quiet. Normally, other children would be running out from neighboring homes around the same time, but no one appeared. Still, I kept running toward the school, too flustered to think clearly.

When I reached the bridge, something felt off—no footsteps behind me, no voices. The sky wasn't brightening as it usually did at dawn; instead, it was growing darker. I hesitated, torn between going forward or turning back.

I spotted a pair of glowing eyes in a shadowy corner just then. Fear surged through me. Was it a wild animal? A monster? I froze. The figure moved. It was just a dog, slowly sauntering away. Still unsettled, I stood there when suddenly I heard footsteps behind me. I turned, my heart pounding. A dark figure was approaching. I almost ran, but then I heard a familiar voice.

"It's three a.m. What are you doing here?" Grandfather inquired.

Only then did we both realize our mistake: neither of us had checked the time. The bright light that had filled my room wasn't the morning sun. It was the brilliant, deceptive glow of the midnight moon.

That night, I learned a lesson I would never forget: no matter how familiar the sky may seem, always check the clock.

### 3: WATCHFUL WOLF

When I was six, I often slept outside with my maternal grandmother to guard our sheep. We would lie on a blanket made of yak skin, wrapped in thick, heavy robes on the rooftop of an adobe sheep pen high in the mountains under a sky full of stars.

The only sounds at night were howling wind and barking dogs. Every morning, we followed a routine: eating roasted barley flour twice. We were that fond of it. After breakfast, we prepared to drive our yaks to the grasslands. Heavy snow covered the path one morning. Flakes still fell as we made our way toward a mountain pass.

Suddenly, we saw a wolf standing silently on a ridge, eyes riveted on us and our yaks. Grandmother didn't hesitate, pulling out her slingshot and launching a stone at it. The wolf bolted but kept looking back as it disappeared into the snow-covered hills.

A neighbor's brave dog soon noticed the wolf and tried to follow it but one of its legs was half gone, so it couldn't keep up.

Eventually, the wolf vanished, but we saw it again later that day. It sat high above us on the mountaintop, still watching our sheep enclosure from afar.

### 4: MY FAVORITE YAK

An old photograph hangs on the wall of my cousin riding a black-and-white yak that had been with us since 2007 through springs, summers, autumns, and winters. The yak had a gentle temperament, a large, sturdy body, and no horns. It was our main means of transportation whenever we moved between pastures and also our favorite seat when my cousin and I were out herding.

Our family often warned us not to ride G.yag rgan khya tho 'Hornless Partly Black Yak. They believed using the same animal for transport and as a seat for play was wrong because it showed a lack of respect.

When my cousin and I were children, we rarely listened to such admonishments, repeatedly riding it secretly. Even when



it was peacefully grazing on a mountainside, we could walk right up and climb on it. It never ran away.

When I returned home one holiday, the yak was gone. When I asked why, my family was visibly upset and said it was getting old, so they had sold it.

I cried the whole afternoon.

## 5: GRANDFATHER'S RADIO

My paternal grandfather always wore a traditional Tibetan hat. He spent afternoons basking in the sun on a tattered leather sofa covered with a blanket in the quiet of our enclosed courtyard.

His hearing had long dulled with age, so he held a weathered, many-times-mended radio close to his ear with his thick, gnarled fingers, straining to catch every word of the Epic of King Ge sar. The verses, half-sung and half-spoken by the renowned artist Skal bzang grags pa, poured forth from the speaker at full volume, echoing across the yard and beyond.

Now and then, Grandfather would murmur a few lines in rhythm.

His navy-blue suit, soft from countless washings, had faded with time, but it was always clean, always dignified. That little radio went everywhere with him; a quiet companion tied to memory and habit.

Years later, he gave it - his most treasured possession - to me. I still keep it, not just as an object, but as an echo of his voice, his stories, and the sunlit silence of those afternoons.

## TIBETAN TERMS

dbyangs can skyid དབངས་ཅན་སྐྱིད།  
g.yag rgan khyā tho གཡག་རྒྱན་ཁྱེ་ཐོ།  
skal bzang grags pa སྐལ་བཟང་གྲགས་པ།

DKON MCHOG SKYABS དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐུབས།  
(Guanquejie 官却杰)<sup>1</sup>

1: LEISURE

Some years ago, my cousin's family was considered wealthy. He often contacted many friends during the primary school summer holidays. I was one of them because I lived with his family then.

Cousin's family had two daughters and two sons. Cousin was the youngest. His father often gave him 200 and 500 RMB every weekend, a significant amount back then. He took me and his friends to a hotel during the summer holidays and introduced me to his friends.

Over time, I became part of their group. Cousin never asked me to spend my own money. When I needed money, my father would give it to my cousin's father, who would then pass it on to me. Cousin's father also gave me some cash directly. Most of the money was spent on hotel stays.

Sometimes, Cousin would book a hotel room for an entire week. The hotel owner was friendly and knew us well. Although we were underage and not officially allowed to register in hotels, Cousin asked relatives to help us register. We spent most of the summer and winter holidays in different hotels, drinking beer, and hanging out with friends. We stayed in almost every hotel in Brag dkar (Xinghai) County. Those were happy, unforgettable times!

2: LAMB'S MOTHER

I was seven when I woke up early one morning. Grandmother had already milked the yaks and prepared breakfast, so it wasn't as early as I thought. Grandmother told me that a sheep was sick and couldn't produce enough milk for her lamb. I heard a lamb bleating in the corridor as she warmed yak milk on the stove.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐུབས། (Guanquejie 官却杰). 2025. 1: Leisure; 2: Lamb's Mother; 3: In Flames; 4: Livestock Cross the River; and 5: A Lethal Fall. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:416-419.

Grandmother said, "You will be this lamb's mother," and handed me a sippy bottle of warm milk.

I fed the lamb. It was very weak due to a lack of milk. After breakfast, I went out to herd the sheep and yaks. I kept thinking about the little lamb. When I returned, I fed it again. It was soon strong enough to walk and followed me everywhere. I was overjoyed. I wore a Tibetan robe, and even though it was snowing, I felt warm while herding livestock in the mountains. The lamb thought I was its mother. I kept the sippy bottle in my Tibetan pouch and fed it when we stopped to rest. Eventually, the lamb grew strong and joined the other sheep in grazing on the grassland. I had to stop feeding it when school started.

### 3: IN FLAMES

My classmates and I played football in a large yard during a winter holiday in primary school. After the game, we stayed and chatted. A street lined with shops selling *rtsam pa* ran in front of the yard. My stepmother often gave me money to buy *rtsam pa* from those shops. A big blue truck was parked in one corner of the yard. It seemed abandoned, and no one ever used it. The yard could accommodate twenty vehicles, though only a few were parked there. In the yard center was a building with broken windows and filled with hay. Later, some classmates bought fireworks to play with.

While enjoying ourselves, someone accidentally threw a firecracker into the building with hay. We didn't notice anything at first, but then someone shouted, "The building was on fire!" as smoke poured out the windows.

We tried to open the door, but it was locked. Some adults came out of their homes and began yelling for help. The fire grew quickly, terrifying us. One classmate yelled, "Run!" We all scattered. I ran straight home up the street from the burning building.

I saw smoke rising into the sky from my home and heard the fire truck's siren. My heart pounded. The adults may have suspected that the children caused it, but there were few

surveillance cameras. We were not accused. I never dared buy *rtsam pa* on that street again.

#### 4: LIVESTOCK CROSS THE RIVER

I was eight and, as usual, went to herd the livestock in the mountains. The sheep and yaks needed water, which we usually got from a shallow spring near the valley. It was located between two mountains. One hot summer afternoon, the livestock were thirsty, and I decided to take them to the Yellow River at the mountain's base. I led the yaks first. They drank water and cooled off in the river, then I drove them back to the mountains.

Afterward, I led the sheep to the river. Everything was going well until I noticed one lamb had separated from the flock and drifted toward the middle of the river, where strong waves were crashing. I could only watch helplessly as the current swept the lamb away. I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone what had happened when I got home.

#### 5: A LETHAL FALL

I spent my winter holiday with my friends. Cousin rented a hotel room for us. After lunch at his place, we went to the hotel. That night, we watched a horror movie and played cards. Around three a.m., we heard a loud noise from the upper floor that sounded like people fighting, and someone drove away in a hurry a few minutes later. I told a friend who was still awake, "They must've lost a fight and fled."

The police soon arrived. We were under eighteen and lacked proper ID, so we were too scared to leave our room. We heard shouting in the corridor, but the police left eventually. Later, we quietly opened the door and went upstairs to see the room. It was a mess. Empty beer bottles were everywhere, and no one was there.

When we went down to the bar counter, we saw a blood-stained sofa. We were told someone had jumped from the fourth floor, shocking and frightening us. By noon, we heard that the victim's family had been informed: their child had died immediately.

## TIBETAN TERMS

dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐུ་བསལ།  
rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།

KONCHOK PAL, DKON MCHOK DPAL དཀོན་མཆོག་དཔལ།  
(Gongquehua 公却华)<sup>1</sup>

1: *MNA'YA* - SWORN BROTHERS

My primary school class had forty-nine students. A few of us were younger than the rest. In our region, children often started school late, so some of my classmates were between fourteen and sixteen in first grade. A few of us who had started school when we were eight or nine were the smallest – the "Little Guys."

Two boys were among my closest companions. We shared laughter, games, secrets... everything. We were inseparable between classes.

Our favorite pastime was playing marbles. We'd dig a shallow hole in the dirt, draw a line a couple of meters away, and flick our marbles with our thumbs, trying to land them in the hole. Sometimes, we also played with trading cards we bought from the small shop near the school.

One day, the oldest of my two friends came to school looking unusually serious. He had been watching a Tibetan-dubbed TV drama about Genghis Khan, broadcast on Satellite Television. The local shop sold and rented DVDs of the series in Tibetan. One episode deeply impressed him because the brothers took a blood oath swearing eternal loyalty, mixed their blood with liquor, and drank it together.

Inspired, he suggested that the three of us become *mna'ya* 'sworn brothers'. It was common to hear people refer to someone as their *mna'ya*.

I asked exactly how to become sworn brothers. Our friend explained what he had seen on TV. We found a small plastic cup from a snack container and filled it with tap water. Then our friend took an ordinary razor blade from a pencil

---

<sup>1</sup> Konchok pal, Dkon mchok dpal དཀོན་མཆོག་དཔལ། (Gongquehua 公却华). 2025. 1: *Mna'ya* - Sworn Brothers; 2: School Discipline and Class Points; 3: Stealing School Canteen Beef; 4: Over the Mountain for a Glimpse of TV; 5: My Old Horse; and My Small Horse. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:420-430.

sharpeners. Without hesitation, he sliced his middle finger. Blood welled up and dripped into the water. I followed, cutting the pinkie of my left hand, and a couple of my drops joined his. Our third friend hesitated, his hands shaking. He tried several times, but no blood came. Terrified, he finally managed to nick his finger enough to produce a single drop of blood.

We stirred the water until the red threads dissolved into a pale-tinted mixture. As we sipped from the cup, we stood together and solemnly declared ourselves *mna'ya*, brothers in bond and spirit, now and forever.

It was strange.

It was sacred.

And it was ours.

That weekend, I recounted the whole story to my grandfather. He listened silently. Then, in his serious, quiet way, he said, "If you truly became *mna'ya*, you must never quarrel or fight. The bond you created must be honored. Sworn brotherhood is not something to take lightly. When the day comes that your *nam shes* 'soul' leaves this world and journeys to the next, your *mna'ya* will be among the souls you meet."

## 2: SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND CLASS POINTS

My school had many rules. Each affected our class score - '*dzin grwa'i skar ma* 'class points'. The school used these scores to evaluate and compare the performance of each class.

Every week, two or three teachers rotated being on duty - the *gza' las res pa* 'teacher on duty' assisted by members of the *slob ma'i tshogs pa* 'student council'. The latter were older students tasked with maintaining discipline. Their responsibilities included ensuring everyone woke up and went to bed on time, monitoring behavior, and assigning a score to each class.

Every class began the week with a score of one hundred. Points were deducted if a student broke a rule or upset a duty teacher or student council member.

Duty teachers checked to see if students got up on time and went straight to class. Those caught loitering or playing had their name and class recorded, and points were deducted. Cleanliness was also inspected. Each class was assigned a section of the schoolyard to keep tidy. More points were deducted if trash was left in that area or the classroom wasn't clean.

Dorm rooms were inspected. Blankets and sheets had to be folded neatly. The cafeteria was over 500 meters away, and we had to run there in formation for breakfast, lunch, and supper.

Breakfast was seven-thirty or eight a.m., lunch was at noon, and dinner was at six p.m. Before breakfast, each class lined up outside the classroom in a line for girls and a line for boys. Each class had a PE captain who shouted commands in Tibetan: *gcig, gnyis, gcig* 'one, two, three'. We were to step with our left foot on "one" and our right foot on "two." Sometimes our steps didn't match the counts, creating disorder.

The PE monitor would shout, "*Gcig, gnyis, gsum, bzhi*" 'One! Two! Three! Four!'" which the entire class would repeat loudly. If a class ran in a neat formation and shouted in unison, a teacher might have rewarded them with bonus points. Whenever our PE monitor gave the signal, we all responded at full volume, and other classes did the same, chanting "One, two, three, four" in rhythm as they ran. Duty teachers oversaw these drills, deducting points if formations were messy or the lines were uneven.

Teachers also monitored for tardiness, fighting, and breaking classroom rules. Offenders' names were recorded, and their class lost points. In some cases, teachers administered corporal punishment. Strict duty teachers might have scolded or physically disciplined students.

We had to go to bed early. Evening study ended at seven-thirty p.m. and lights out was at eight-thirty p.m. Duty teachers and student council members patrolled the dorms to ensure everyone was in bed. A class was penalized if one of their members was caught going to the bathroom or playing.



Sometimes, the punishment was harsh. Students might have been forced to stand barefoot outside without a coat for ten to thirty minutes.

Even so, some students couldn't sleep. The more daring ones might have snuck out in pairs to walk around the schoolyard. It wasn't unheard of for students to secretly leave campus, heading to the county town two or three kilometers away.

On the other hand, students could earn bonus points for good deeds. If someone found a lost item and turned it in, their class was rewarded, which led to dishonest behavior. Some students faked good deeds, turning in their own belongings, such as pencils or books, pretending they had "found" them.

Duty teachers delivered a weekly report ranking classes based on their final scores every Saturday. In front of our classroom was an open space with a flagpole, and about 200 meters away stood the flag-raising platform. After the fourth class on Saturday at around noon, every class gathered in formation in two lines per class, boys on one side, girls on the other. If the lines were crooked, teachers would adjust them.

Once everyone was in place, a duty teacher would step onto the platform and give the report, announcing which class had the lowest score, which students had broken rules, and what had happened during the week. If the offense was serious, the student would be criticized publicly. But students who did good deeds were also praised. The top three classes were announced and awarded small cash prizes: thirty RMB for first place, twenty for second, and ten for third.

After the announcements, the teachers on duty for the next week introduced themselves and reviewed the school rules again. Then we'd head to lunch.

The *'dzin bdag dge rgan* 'class head teacher' for the class that finished last in the rankings might not have let their students go home for the weekend. The punishment for having the lowest score was to stay at school, sometimes picking up trash around the grounds. Some students were picked up by

their parents, while others remained on campus. Around this time, families would begin arriving at the school gates, ready to take their children home, except for those of us whose class had finished last.

### 3: STEALING SCHOOL CANTEEN BEEF

Our primary school classrooms were low, flat-roofed buildings with no winter heating or summer air conditioning. The dormitories were just as cold in winter. We wrapped ourselves tightly in blankets to stay warm.

Evening self-study ended early, at seven-thirty p.m., and we were expected to be in bed by eight p.m. Teachers on night duty and student council members strictly enforced this rule. But we often couldn't sleep and whispered to one another in the dorms.

If someone was caught making noise during the nightly room checks, their name was recorded. Worse still, they might have been punished by standing outside barefoot and without a coat for fifteen to thirty minutes. Repeat offenders were sometimes physically disciplined by certain strict teachers, all in the name of maintaining silence and order.

Ironically, fear of punishment made it even harder for students to sleep. Some older kids snuck out and wandered around the schoolyard late at night.

The only source of warmth in the classrooms was a single *lcags thab* 'metal stove' that burned *ong ba* 'yak dung'. Each class had four or five students assigned to *las res pa* 'daily duty'. These students arrived early to clean the classroom, maintain order during breaks, and most importantly, feed the stove to keep the classroom warm.

In a corner of the schoolyard, each class had its own small *ong khang* 'yak shed' for storing dried yak dung. When there were no classes on Wednesdays or Saturdays, our homeroom teacher took us outside the school to collect dung from yaks that often roamed freely nearby. Dried dung was scattered across the grasslands. We brought plastic bags, gathered what we could,

hailed it back to school, and stacked it neatly in our shed — our precious fuel for the long, cold winter ahead.

One night, after lights out, a few older classmates quietly called me and a friend over. They said they had a plan. They were eyeing the storage room next to the school cafeteria, where, according to rumor, beef, vegetables, and dried noodles were kept for students.

The door was locked, but there was a window, just wide enough, they figured, for two small kids like us to squeeze through. We tested it first by poking our heads inside, and after a bit of effort, we managed to wriggle inside where we found a large freezer full of frozen yak meat. Piles of dried noodles and vegetables were stacked nearby. Following their instructions, we grabbed a slab of meat and a few bags of noodles and passed them out through the window.

It didn't stop there. They also wanted more fuel, so we broke into another class's *ong khang* and stole two full sacks of dry yak dung. Back in our classroom, we added dung to the stove and got a fire going.

One boy in our group was the son of our math teacher. He ran home and returned with a big cooking pot, salt, a cleaver, and a ladle.

We chopped the meat into small chunks, filled the pot with tap water, added the meat, noodles, and salt, and let it simmer over the fire. When it was ready, we gathered around and devoured the steaming hot noodle soup. I still recall how incredibly delicious it was.

#### 4: OVER THE MOUNTAIN FOR A GLIMPSE OF TV

Our winter pasture was where we lived during the cold season. Behind our house stood a mountain. On the far side of that mountain lived a relative of my maternal grandmother, the son of her distant cousin. If we climbed straight over the mountain, we could directly reach their house nestled at the base of the slope. If we followed the winding trail, the journey stretched to over four kilometers. Climbing was definitely the quicker route.

At that time, their household had electricity - a rare luxury. The village chief lived nearby, and thanks to a rural electrification project, his home was among the first to be connected. Since my grandmother's relative lived near him, they could tap into the line. The rest of us in the village lived without electricity from the electrification project. Instead, we relied on solar-powered systems.

They had a big, boxy widescreen television with a bulky back, the kind you don't see anymore. More excitingly, they owned a collection of DVDs, Tibetan-dubbed versions of such shows as Thang sin bla ma'i tnam thmr 'Journey to the West', Rgyal khamz zil gyis gnon pa'i gad rgyang 'The Smiling, Proud Wanderer', and Chu ngogs gtam rgyud 'Water Margin'. These films were dubbed by the Qinghai A mdo Satellite TV Station. During Lo sar 'Tibetan New Year', we watched these shows and immediately fell in love with them when we visited their home. That TV was the main reason we loved going to their home.

When I was five, I lived with the family of my mother's younger sister. Her son, my cousin, was the same age as me. One day, the adults told us to go up the mountain and bring down the yaks. We set out early to herd the animals. Once we reached the top, we looked across and saw the familiar rooftop of Grandmother's relative's house. We whispered about whether we should go watch TV. After a quick debate, we made up our minds, left the yaks grazing on the mountain, and climbed down the other side, straight to their home.

Their family was incredibly kind and had six kids. The son of Grandmother's relative especially loved playing with children. Even the youngest, who was still quite a bit older than us, treated us with warmth and affection.

When we arrived, they asked how we'd come. We told them we'd run over the mountain to watch TV and that we weren't going home that night. Grandmother's relative's son immediately saddled his horse and rode to our house to inform our families so they wouldn't worry. That evening, he returned,

and we spent the night at their place, watching TV, and playing with his sisters.

We played all sorts of games, especially hide-and-seek. We split into two teams: one would hide an object and the other would search. If they found it, they won; if not, we did. If the seekers gave up, they chanted "*oM ma Ni pad+me Hu~M*," signaling surrender, and we'd come out of hiding to start a new round.

Once, one of the older girls hid me inside a small storage box. The seekers couldn't find me and eventually tried to lure me out. One called, "Come out, I've got candy! Delicious candy!"

A teammate whispered, "Don't fall for it! They're tricking you! Stay hidden!"

I shouted back, "I don't care! I want candy!" and jumped out of the box, making everyone laugh.

The next day, around noon, the son of Grandmother's relative rode his horse and took us back home. Some older kids in their family could've walked us, but we were worried our parents might scold or even beat us for not returning the night before. We specifically asked him to take us. He didn't just take us home, he also spoke with our parents, asking them not to punish us.

## 5: MY OLD HORSE

When I was four, our family had a white horse with a gentle, calm temperament. We called it *Gyo li dkar ril* 'White Horse'. It was already old when I was born, and we often said it was born old.

Even when children crawled back and forth beneath its belly, it never got angry or kicked.

According to our local tradition, horses are rarely mounted from the right. Herders always mount from the left. Over time, most horses become uneasy or even aggressive if approached from the right.

My horse was different. Whether I mounted from the left or the right, it remained calm and obedient, never showing unease.

Every evening, when Father brought the yaks home, I waited nearby. As he drove the yaks into the enclosure to milk, I liked to ride my horse and help.

Sometimes, Mother stopped me because I was too slow on horseback, and running on foot was more efficient. When she called for help herding the yaks, I responded faster on foot than if I had to steer the horse around. In her view, riding only made things more complicated.

The journey from our winter pasture to the summer pasture was more than twenty kilometers. As a child, I couldn't ride freely like my parents. I clung tightly to the saddle, focused entirely on keeping my balance. Sometimes, Father tied a rope to my horse and led us to the summer pasture.

That gentle horse was my favorite companion and my family quietly understood it belonged to me.

## 6: MY SMALL HORSE

My great-grandfather was from Gser rta (Seda) County in Dkar mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Pr'menoursurei kherskille(Sichuan) Province. When he was a child, the family migrated to Mgo log (Guoluo) Prefecture and eventually settled in Gcig sgril (Jiuzhi) County.

During summer break when I was ten, my parents were working on the summer pasture while my grandparents stayed at the winter pasture to care for our house and land. I stayed with my grandparents during that time.

One day, some of Grandfather's relatives visited. They were part of a horse-trading caravan of more than twenty people riding and driving over a hundred horses all the way from Gser rta to our area to sell.

They stayed overnight at our place. Grandfather warmly welcomed them, offered them *rtsam pa* and other foods, let them stay on our pasture for a few days, and provided dried yak dung for their campfires.

News of the caravan quickly spread, and many villagers came to see the horses. Some bought horses.

When the traders prepared to return home, they told Grandfather they wanted to give me a horse and asked me to choose one. I picked a small yellow horse with a gentle temperament from the herd. It could be ridden without a bit. Sometimes, I tied a rope around its mouth and rode it that way when I went to herd yaks.

We all called the horse Rag phrug 'Small Yellow'.

One weekend, when I came home from school, Mother broke some devastating news: "Your horse was stolen a few days ago."

We never heard anything about it again.

Heartbroken, I couldn't stop thinking about it for a long, long time.

## TIBETAN TERMS

'dzin bdag dge rgan འཛིན་བདག་དགེ་རྒན།

bzhi བཞི།

dkar mdzes དཀར་མཛེས།

gcig sgril གཅིག་སྒྲིལ།

gser rta གསེར་རྟ།

gyo li dkar ril རྒྱལ་ལི་དཀར་རིལ།

las res pa ལས་རེས་པ།

mgo log མགོ་ལོག།

oM ma Ni pad+me hU~M ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ

ong khang ཨོང་ཁང།

rag phrug རག་ཕུག།

rnam shes རྣམ་ཤེས།

si khron སི་ཁྲོན།

'dzin grwa'i skar ma

འཛིན་གྲའི་སྐར་མ།

chu ngogs gtam rgyud

ཆུ་ངོགས་གཏམ་རྒྱུད།

gcig གཅིག།

gnyis གཉིས།

gsum གསུམ།

konchok pal, dkon mchok

dpal དཀོན་མཆོག་དཔལ།

lcags thab ལྷགས་ཐབ།

mna' ya མནའ་ཡ།

ong ba ཨོང་བ།, lci ba ལྷེ་བ།

ong sgye ཨོང་སྒྱེ།

rgyal khams zil gyis gnon

pa'i gad rgyangs

རྒྱལ་ཁམས་ཟེལ་གྱིས་གཞོན་པའི་གད་རྒྱངས།

rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།

thang sin bla ma'i rnam thar

ཐང་སིན་བླ་མའི་རྣམ་ཐར།

**CHINESE TERMS**

**Sichuan** 四川

**Seda** 色达

**Ganzi** 甘孜

**Guoluo** 果洛

**Jiuzhi** 久治



## MDA' MO DHON GRUP RDO RJE མདའ་མོ་དྭན་གུལ་རྩོ་རྒྱེ། (Dongzhuduojie 东主多杰)<sup>1</sup>

### 1: FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

The morning I had eagerly anticipated for several years arrived when I was eight. My mother had already prepared *phyé mar* 'roasted barley flour with butter and dry cheese', bread, and candy. My father made incense offerings on the mountain behind our house. Today, I would finally stop crying and begging to go to school with my older siblings.

I worried about leaving my parents without help to tend our livestock. I had done my best to help my parents herd our livestock. Now that I was going to school, no one would be left to help them. My father took my two older sisters and me by motorcycle to the primary school, seventy-one kilometers from our village. We traveled by the lake of our village, Kun dga' mtsho, and across desert terrain and rivers. There were only narrow tracks, no wide roads.

### 2: JO KHANG PILGRIMAGE

One summer, I visited the Jo khang the first time. I rose early and called my friend. I had arrived in Lha sa the previous night by train and was unfamiliar with the temple's location.

Traditionally, pilgrims to Lha sa begin at the Jo khang to worship the Jo wo before visiting the Potala. When my friend arrived at my hotel, we shared a simple breakfast of Tibetan noodles.

Having lived in Lhasa for several years, he knew the way to the Jo khang. We purchased bottles of melted butter and got small change from the Bar skor.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mda' mo dhon grup rdo rje མདའ་མོ་དྭན་གུལ་རྩོ་རྒྱེ། (Dongzhuduojie 东主多杰). 2025. 1: First Day of School; 2: Jo khang Pilgrimage; 3: Moving to Summer Pasture; 4: Healed; and 5: Pilgrimage with Mother. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:431-434.

There were two gates at the Jo wo, one for tourists and another for pilgrims. We waited in line for about half an hour. The walls displayed magnificent centuries-old *thang ka*.

I marveled at how people were praying so intently for all sentient creatures. The atmosphere warmed my heart.

Tears flowed involuntarily down my face as we slowly approached the Jo wo image. Time seemed to stop as I prayed for the well-being of all sentient beings.

### 3: MOVING TO SUMMER PASTURE

One spring morning, my family prepared to move to our summer pasture. When I awoke, my father had already washed his face and made smoke offerings, while my mother prepared our food, clothes, milk containers, and tent. My brother had gone to fetch the horses.

After eating a breakfast of barley flour with butter, dry cheese, and fried dumplings, we heard our dog barking outside. I went outside and found my cousin and best playmate, who was one year younger than me. He said, "My mother told me you're going to the summer pasture, so she asked me to give you this tiger toy that Grandfather bought for us during his pilgrimage to Sku 'bum Monastery."

I was delighted. We ate dumplings together and played with the tiger toy on the table.

While my family finished preparations, we drove the sheep near my grandparents' house to say goodbye. I told them, "See you in autumn!"

Grandmother gave me a bag of candies. I took a few in my hand and tried to return the bag, but she insisted I keep it, saying they had enough and the candies were for our family's journey.

#### 4: HEALED

I had a motorcycle accident on my way to check my high school entrance examination results and was hospitalized for a week in the county hospital. I showed no improvement.

My mother called to say she had consulted a *bla ma* who had determined several religious activities were needed. I returned home, and the *bla ma* explained that the accident was related to a zodiacal conflict, so he chanted scriptures and made *gtor ma* offerings.

Two days later, I was completely recovered.

#### 5: PILGRIMAGE WITH MOTHER

When I was six, my mother and I woke early and dressed in new Tibetan robes. After breakfast, my father carried our bag to neighbor A khu nor b+he's adobe home. It was an autumn morning, and though slightly cold, my Tibetan robe kept me warm. My mother explained that we would listen to the *bla ma's* teachings and meet my maternal grandparents. I was excited to see them.

At A khu nor b+he's house, bags were being loaded into a tractor-trailer. Father added ours. I had never seen such a machine before. Eight of us, including the driver, climbed into the tractor-trailer. Mother and I said goodbye to Father, and we departed.

On the road, we faced challenges when it began raining. We used a large plastic sheet to cover ourselves. The terrible engine smell and loud sounds made me nauseous. By noon, we had finally reached an amazing place with a thousand tents. A river flowed to the right of the tents, and we could hear the sounds of *ma Ni* chanting. Several large, tall tents where the *bla ma* and monks resided stood in the center.

We soon found my uncle and maternal grandparents, who were overjoyed that we had come and would stay in their tent.

## TIBETAN TERMS

A khu nor b+he ཨ་ཁུ་ནོར་རྩེ།

bla ma ལྷ་མ་།

chos ཆོས།

gtor ma གཏོར་མ།

jo khang ཇོ་ཁང་།

lha sa ལྷ་ས།

phye mar ཕྱེ་མར།

sku 'bum སྤུ་འབུམ།

bar skor བར་སྐོར།

bsang བསང་།

dge ba དགེ་བ།

jo bo ཇོ་བོ།

kun dga' mtsho ཀུན་དགའ་མཚོ།

ma Ni མ་ཉི།

rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།

thang ka ཐང་ཀ།

## DAM CHOS NYI MA དམ་ཙོང་ཉི་མ། (Dangqiunima 当求尼玛)<sup>1</sup>

### 1: BEST CHILDHOOD FRIEND

My best childhood friend was Skal bzang zla ba, the child of our neighbor. He was two years younger than me. We grew up together and were best friends. After he entered high school, however, things changed. Something was separating us.

We played many silly games that were only suitable for children. We herded yaks together. He begged my father to let me stay at his home. We even stole cigarettes from his home and smoked them for fun.

What impressed me the most among these trivial memories was a quarrel. We were in our teens, and he joined others in making fun of me. He shouldn't have done that. We fought. He was very strong and pinned me to the ground, but he never hit me. I was unwilling to yield to him. It was only when he began crying that I stopped the fight. He ran home crying. I chased after him to apologize.

I was afraid he would tell my parents, and worried that I wouldn't be able to play with him anymore. I pleaded with him a long time before he promised not to tell anyone.

Although we don't talk about everything as we used to, and even though time has erased some precious memories, I still believe he gave me the best childhood and friendship!

### 2: EARLY CHILDHOOD MEMORY

My very kind, amiable aunt told me a story about when I was five and went to her home, a seven-minute walk from mine. My grandmother lived with her. I stepped over a high threshold and entered her house. She turned around with a teapot, spilling tea on my left shoulder. She anxiously picked me up and ran to our home.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dam chos nyi ma དམ་ཙོང་ཉི་མ། (Dangqiunima 当求尼玛). 2025. 1: Best Childhood Friend; 2: Early Childhood Memory; 3: Illness; 4: Hand Sniffing; and Joy. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 65:435-437.

I cried so hard I passed out.

She cried bitterly and kept repeating that she should have paid more attention to me. I don't know my parents' response. I've never asked.

After that incident, she gave me a female yak that passed away around 2017.

My aunt passed away in 2019. I often think of her and her laughter. If her illness had been detected earlier, she might have been able to stay in this world a few more years.

She had three daughters, the children of different fathers. Her life was bitter, but she was also passionate and warm!

### 3: ILLNESS

I had a severe cold and was terrified of the village doctor, who carried a medical kit. When he came to our house, I wanted to run away. I don't know how good his medical skills and medicine. Were but at least he genuinely wanted to help others. However, he might not have understood the concept of allergic reactions and the dangers of mixing medications.

He gave me a lot of injections. Intramuscular injections in my buttocks were extremely painful and had little effect. Later, the injection site became inflamed and swollen, so Father took me to the prefecture town for treatment.

Every time Father told me we were going to the hospital, I begged him to skip it just once. He would smile and tell me he would carry me on his shoulders. It would be, he said, like I was riding a horse and wouldn't feel the pain.

The hospital was not near where we lived. Every time he carried me to the hospital, he never said a single harsh word, though I cried and fussed.

A small scar remains on my body, a reminder of Father's kindness that has accompanied me throughout my life.

#### 4: HAND SNIFFING

The person I was most afraid of in my childhood was an old monk who lived behind the hill opposite my house. People my age and those much older than me were all scared of him. Whenever he came to my house, he sniffed our hands and asked if we had killed any small insects or birds. He would ask why the smell of blood was on our hands. Whenever we tried to explain, he would say he could see everything clearly from that hill.

Our parents didn't stop him. Even though this prevented us from killing small animals, it left worries in our young hearts.

When we saw him walking across the frozen river in winter, we prayed he would slip and fall. Once he did fall, and we were genuinely happy.

Perhaps our parents approved of his actions most of the time because it saved them the time of having to teach us not to hurt small animals.

He was truly a nightmare when I was a child.

#### 5: JOY

The happiest thing in my childhood was my parents giving me everything I wanted and all the free time I desired. As a child, I thought everyone was treated the same way and that every child was cared for by their parents like I was. But I realized that wasn't the case when I attended high school and college. My parents gave me freedom to make choices but stopped me from making wrong choices because I wasn't old enough to avoid making misjudgments.

This is the most memorable, touching memory I'm lucky to have.

#### TIBETAN TERMS

dam chos nyi ma དམ་ཆོས་ཉི་མ།  
skal bzang zla ba སྐལ་བཟང་ལྷ་བ།

## BOOK REVIEW



## REVIEW: *KUANG BIAO 'THE KNOCKOUT'* BY ZHU JUNYI AND XU JIZHOU<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Wu Jing 吴晶 and Ye Boyu 叶伯钰

Zhu Junyi 朱俊懿 and Xu Jizhou. 徐纪周 2023. *Kuang Biao 狂飙 [The Knockout]*. Qingdao 青岛: Qingdao chubanshe 青岛出版社 [Qingdao Publishing House]. 485pp. ISBN: 978-7-5736-0430-9 (paperback 68 RMB). 10.5281/zenodo.12679051.

Reviewed by Wu Jing 吴晶 and Ye Boyu 叶伯钰  
Shaanxi Normal University 陕西师范大学

Acclaimed by viewers since its broadcast on 14 January 2023 on China Central Television Drama Channel (CCTV-8)<sup>2</sup> and simulcast by iQiyi,<sup>3</sup> *Kuang Biao 'The Knockout'* has been an immensely successful TV procedural drama, propelling it to the top in ratings. It received praise from the audience, ranking first in average ratings among evening TV series on satellite channels.<sup>4</sup> It enjoyed a peak iQiyi content popularity index of 11,800, making this crime series the show with the highest index in iQiyi history. The drama reached a record high of 3.8 percent in its real-time peak viewership index on CCTV-8 and received critical acclaim from viewers.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kuang Biao 'The Knockout' by Zhu Junyi and Xu Jizhou. 2024. Reviewed by Wu Jing and Ye Boyu. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 439-456.

<sup>2</sup> CCTV Drama Channel (abbreviation: CCTV-8), broadcasting TV dramas, began broadcast 1 January 1996 (<https://bit.ly/3Rnurjm>, accessed 18 April 2023).

<sup>3</sup> iQiyi, a video streaming platform, offers a massive selection of Chinese content, Asian content, and international movies and dramas ([bit.ly/48DL2X6](https://bit.ly/48DL2X6), accessed 18 December 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Satellite television or satellite TV is broadcast delivery based on space satellite signals (<https://bit.ly/48V3MSn>, accessed 18 December 2023).

As of 27 January 2024, over eighty-five percent of the reviewers on Douban, an influential Chinese media review platform, rated it four of five stars, resulting in a peaking rating of 8.5/10.<sup>1</sup>

In the same year, Qingdao Publishing House released a novel of the same name, adapted from the script of the TV series *Kuang Biao* and co-authored by Xu Jizhou (b. 1976) and Zhu Junyi. Xu, a Chinese screenwriter and director, graduated from the Directing Department at the Central Academy of Drama in 2000. In 2012, he was recognized as the Most Powerful Director at the 18<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Television Festival's Magnolia Awards<sup>2</sup> for the success of the TV series he directed, *Yongbumomie de fanhao* 'Designation Forever'. A decade later, Xu was nominated for Best Director at the 28<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Television Festival's Magnolia Awards, owing to *Kuang Biao*'s success.

Xu's directorial works focus on police and anti-war stories set in a wide range of periods, thematizing justice that can never be defeated and embodying social changes. *Yongbumomie de fanhao* 'Forever Designation' (2011) and *Chunjiang yingxiong zhi xiucai yushang bing* 'XiuCai<sup>3</sup> Encountered Soldiers' (2015) narrate the story of people banded together in Northeast China to fight invaders during the war of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, emphasizing the Chinese spirit of perseverance and solidarity against adversaries. *Xinlizui zhi*

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://movie.douban.com/subject/35465232/>, accessed 27 January 2024.

<sup>2</sup> The Magnolia Award (Shanghai TV Festival Magnolia Award), founded in 1986, is an international TV award organized by the State Administration of Radio and Television of China, China Central Radio and Television (CCTV), and Shanghai Municipal People's Government. It is hosted by the Shanghai Radio and Television Bureau and the Shanghai Radio and Television Station, ([bit.ly/4aIWgvh](http://bit.ly/4aIWgvh), accessed 20 April 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Xiucai, a reference to "cultivated talent," was a title bestowed on graduates of an examination in the state examination system created during the Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties. Today, it generally refers to a talented person. See <https://bit.ly/42ezxDt>, accessed 6 January 2024, for more.

*chengshi zhi guang* 'The Liquidator' (2017) depicts detective Fang Mu's apprehending a psychopathic murderer.

With years of experience directing and writing police dramas, Xu has developed a unique narrative perspective on creating scripts that prepared him for writing *Kuang Biao*, representing his experience directing police dramas, his reflections on social realities, and his explorations of complex human nature. The different narrative perspective, twisting plotlines, and excellent characterization differentiate it from such contemporaneous works as *Ta shi shui* 'Who Is He' (2023) and Xiaoshi de shiyiceng 'The Lost Eleventh Floor' (2023).

According to an interview with Xu by Phoenix New Media<sup>1</sup> on 15 February 2023, the novel's title is from the last line of a lyric poem named *Dielianhua Cong Tingzhou Xiang Changsha*<sup>2</sup> written by Mao Zedong (1893-1976).<sup>3</sup>

蝶恋花 • 从汀州向长沙  
六月天兵征腐恶，  
万丈长缨要把鲲鹏缚。  
赣水那边红一角，  
偏师借重黄公略。  
百万工农齐踊跃，  
席卷江西直捣湘和鄂。  
国际悲歌歌一曲，  
狂飙为我从天落。

---

<sup>1</sup> Phoenix New Media is a cross-platform online new media company with three major platforms: Internet media website ([www.ifeng.com](http://www.ifeng.com)), mobile channel, and video channel ([v.ifeng.com](http://v.ifeng.com)). See [bit.ly/3TLCVDW](http://bit.ly/3TLCVDW) (accessed 19 December 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Mao Zedong composed this in September 1930 when the Red Army suffered heavy losses during the siege of Changsha. Mao ordered a retreat on 13 September. The lyrics express revolutionary enthusiasm and fighting spirit of workers and peasants. See [bit.ly/3H7SdLm](http://bit.ly/3H7SdLm) (accessed 20 April 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Mao Zedong led the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese People's Liberation Army, and the People's Republic of China ([bit.ly/41EP6nV](http://bit.ly/41EP6nV), accessed 20 April 2023).

Translated as *Tune: 'Butterflies Linger Over Flowers March from Tingzhou to Changsha (July 1930)'* by the Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong<sup>1</sup> (Xu 2020:146):

Heavenly troops wage war in June on evil lords,  
Ready to capture rocs and whales with long, long cords.  
Beyond the River Gan a corner blazes red,  
Thanks to the army with Huang Gonglue at its head.  
A million workers and peasants all leap and bound,  
Sweeping Jiangxi, on Hunan and Hubei they pound,  
The stirring strains of "the Internationale" rise;  
A furious storm comes down for our sake from the skies.

Kuang Biao 'Furious Storm' metaphorically denotes an unstoppable revolutionary force (Zhou 2019:34), referring to the struggle between An Xin and Gao Qiqiang,<sup>2</sup> and the inescapable force of justice the former represents.

Xu Jizhou uses two English translations - The Knockout and Punch Out. "Knockout" refers to the end of a boxing match when a boxer hits his opponent so hard that he falls and cannot get up. It is also a competition in which only the winner at each stage continues to play until there is only one winner. "Punch out" suggests the time you leave work and put a card into a machine. "Punch someone out" is hitting them so hard that they become unconscious. Kuang Biao refers to a duel in line with the rivalry between the underworld leader, Gao Qiqiang, and the grassroots police officer, An Xin.

The novel's background is early 21<sup>st</sup>-century China after entering the World Trade Organization. The economy is growing rapidly, and numerous opportunities are created, igniting

---

<sup>1</sup> Xu Yuanchong's (1921-2021) translations include Chinese, English, and French with an emphasis on English translations of ancient Chinese poetry. His best-known works include the English version of Poetic Edda and Ch'u Rhetoric ([bit.ly/41FZonM](http://bit.ly/41FZonM), accessed 20 April 2023).

<sup>2</sup> The novel's protagonists.

soaring aspirations. Young people have numerous options, including committing crimes to gain riches for a materially better life. The novel has the structure of a three-act play, presenting China's evolving social trajectory, depicting societal issues in three different periods, and exploring the complexity of human nature using choices the characters make in response to real-life temptations.

With the corresponding titles of An Liu 'Undercurrent', Feng Lang 'Wind and Wave', and Ping Jing 'Calm' (my translation), three sections of the novel depict social conflicts in three different periods, highlighting shifts in the objectives and tactics of criminals represented by the protagonist, Gao Qiqiang.

Set in fictional Jinghai, the plot unfolds with the imprisonment of the kind-hearted, honest, and obscure fishmonger, Gao Qiqiang, whose parents died in a car accident when he was thirteen. With 500 *yuan* in compensation, he rents a stall in a vegetable market, sells fish to support his family, and eventually sees his younger brother (Gao Qisheng) and sister (Gao Qilan) through college.

At the beginning of the story, Tang Xiaolong and Tang Xiaohu brutally manipulate the market where Gao Qiqiang sells fish. Gao offers the hooligans a bribe to regain control of his fish stall, but they refuse because the amount is too small. Thus, Gao loses his stall and is beaten. Further conflicts between the two sides erupt, resulting in Gao's imprisonment. A police officer, An Xin, learns what happens and helps and protects Gao after his release.

Gao Qisheng is introduced to the idea of selling Xiaolingtong<sup>1</sup> through his classmate, Cao Bin, and learns he can make a big profit. He returns home in his last semester and introduces it to Gao Qiqiang. They prepare for this pursuit but

---

<sup>1</sup> Xiaolingtong is wireless technology that allows limited roaming at the cost of fixed telephony. In 2024, it generally referred to a type of cell phone that was popular in the early 2000s ([bit.ly/47meG29](http://bit.ly/47meG29), accessed 23 April 2023).

lack 30,000 *yuan* as a bribe to a boss who can help them with their business.

Meanwhile, Xu Lei, the son of Xu Jiang, the leader of organ trafficking, angers Bai Jiangbo by incurring a debt to him. Bai Jiangbo asks the Tang brothers to beat Xu in revenge and receive 50,000 *yuan*. Coincidentally, Tang Xiaolong offers Gao Qiqiang 30,000 *yuan* if he beats Xu Lei. Desperate for 30,000 *yuan*, Gao agrees. Unexpectedly, Xu Lei is accidentally electrocuted when Gao approaches him.

After discovering Bai Jiangbo sent the Tang brothers to beat his son, Xu Jiang is furious after his son's death and kidnaps Tang Xiaohu in revenge. Before Bai Jiangbo is buried alive by Xu Jiang, Bai's wife (Chen Shuting) flees Jinghai with their son. Tang Xiaolong seeks Gao Qiqiang's assistance to save his brother. The police suspect that Tang Xiaohu may have been involved in organ trafficking due to a lack of money. Tang Xiaohu's kidnapping and the police's investigation into organ trafficking are related to Xu Jiang. Consequently, Gao Qiqiang suspects that Xu Jiang may be the mastermind of organ trafficking. In exchange for Tang Xiaohu, Xu Jiang asks Gao Qiqiang and Tang Xiaolong to kill Chen Shuting, who knows the truth about her husband's death.

Gao Qiqiang and Tang Xiaolong wait in ambush to hijack Chen Shuting and mistakenly believe An Xin escorts her and is in his car. In fact, Chen Shuting is escorted back to Jinghai by Li Xiang, An Xin's best friend and colleague. Entrusting his brother to Gao Qiqiang, Tang Xiaolong independently attacks An Xin and snatches An's gun, which leads to apprehension for attacking the police.

At this moment, Gao Qiqiang still has a chance to lead a normal life after unintentionally becoming entangled in a murder case if he confesses to An Xin that he and Tang Xiaolong were accomplices in attacking the police officer. However, the lure of money and power makes Gao Qiqiang commit more serious crimes.

Gao Qiqiang falls in love with Chen Shuting the moment he lays eyes on her. Following their marriage, thanks to Chen Shuting's connection with Tai Shu 'Uncle Tai' (my translation), the owner of the Jiangong Group and monopolist of Jinghai's real estate market, Gao Qiqiang venerates Uncle Tai as his godfather. A few years later, Gao Qiqiang is promoted to general manager of the Jiangong Group and oversees the resort Mang Cun 'Mang Village' project (my translation).

The government's demolition of Mang Village conflicts with the resort plan that Gao Qiqiang intends to implement in Mang Village. The party represented by Li Youtian, the head of Mang Village, and his son, Li Hongwei, attempted to gain extra profit through the government's demolition of Mang Village, exceeding the benefits Gao Qiqiang provided. Their ensuing conflict intensifies and cannot be reconciled.

In the meantime, the journalist, Meng Yu, An Xin's girlfriend, is exposed when she investigates a drug deal in Mengyuan Bar. She is kidnapped by Zhong Asi (Gao Qisheng's henchman involved in the drug business), and Li Hongwei.

While the police apprehend the kidnapper and rescue Meng Yu, they uncover the drug business. Gao Qiqiang is told by Gong Kaijiang, the deputy district mayor in charge of the demolition of Mang Village, that Meng Yu's kidnapping is related to the demolition of Mang Village and drug trafficking in the village.

Gao Qiqiang is furious when he learns addicts take drugs at the casino run by his younger brother, Gao Qisheng. He fears that the police will reveal Gao Qisheng's drug trafficking crimes. Consequently, to protect his brother, after finding out that Gao Qisheng's henchman kidnapped Mang Yu, he asks Chen Jinmo and Gao Qisheng to save Mang Yu. After rescuing Meng Yu, Gao Qisheng beats Li Hongwei to death with a frozen fish because Li Hongwei insulted him by mocking the Gao brothers for previously being obscure fish vendors.

To lure Li Hongwei's killer, the police spread news that Li Hongwei, who died after being sent to the hospital, is alive. Gao

Qiqiang utilizes Huang Yao (Chen Jinmo's daughter), as a hostage to blackmail Chen Jinmo to kill Li Hongwei, because he worries Li Hongwei will confess to the police that the drug trafficking mastermind is Gao Qisheng. When Chen Jinmo arrives at the hospital and finds that Li Hongwei is dead, the police arrest him. Consequently, Chen Jinmo commits suicide and Gao Qiqiang adopts his daughter. To avenge her father's death, Huang Yao collects evidence of Gao Qiqiang's crimes and kills Chen Shuting in a car accident.

Gao Qiqiang's web of power grows in Jinghai City, encompassing grassroots policies to senior government officials. He uses his influence to become a government official and achieves his aims by bribing other officials. For instance, to sabotage the Supervisory Committee's investigation of gang crimes and corruption, he bribes Yang Jian, Meng Yu's husband, who was once a narcotics police officer. Through Gao Qiqiang's contacts, Yang Jian is promoted to director of the Jinghai Electricity Bureau, which helps Gao Qiqiang monopolize the entire electrical power system.

In contrast, An Xin is demoted from a criminal police officer to a traffic police officer. Gao Qiqiang's powerful connections tempts his seniors and friends into illegal activities, forcing them to conspire with him. For example, after a decade of employment, An Xin's master, Cao Chuang, gives in to pressure from his boss, Zhao Lidong, Jinghai's deputy major, to conceal evidence of Xu Jiang's organ trafficking to advance his position. Zhang Biao, An Xin's colleague, becomes Tang Xiaolong's collaborator because Zhang's wife takes bribes from Tang Xiaolong. Zhang Biao divulges information to Tang Xiaolong before Tang is investigated for loan sharking. The brutal criminal gang led by Gao Qiqiang has destroyed many lives. An Xin, who is adamant about dismantling this criminal gang, realizing that the gang threatened all the police officers' families and friends, chooses to break up with Meng Yu to protect her.



Gao Qiqiang creates an airtight wall of protection around himself by offering bribes to and colluding with government officials, including retired cadres. Some government officials, such as Mr. Huang, a retired veteran cadre in a nursing home, and Zhao Lidong, Jinghai City's deputy mayor, provide Gao Qiqiang the opportunity to become a government official and thus acquiesce to his crimes.

There are also several instances of charity. Kindergartens and nursing homes are built and provided free to officials' families. As violent crimes worsen, Gao Qiqiang's henchmen are apprehended in turn, and protective umbrellas sheltering him are gradually exposed. A national crackdown on organized gang crimes succeeds at the novel's end. Underworld criminals led by Gao Qiqiang are arrested and brought to justice, and Gao Qiqiang is sentenced to death.

This novel has excellent perspectives on characterization and narrative techniques, and unique characters are portrayed. For instance, Gao Qiqiang, an obscure fishmonger, becomes a sophisticated, vicious criminal. His complex personality is vividly depicted. As a round character,<sup>1</sup> he takes care of his younger siblings, protecting them from harm and breaking laws on occasion to protect his younger brother. As a husband, he respects and loves his wife (Chen Shuting).

Initially virtuous and kind, Gao Qiqiang's thirst for power brutalizes his criminal methods. He penetrates the real estate and electrical power systems and amasses wealth through loan sharking and bribery, inserting his cronies into social systems. For example, he bribes Zhao Lidong in exchange for a government position. He dispatches Chen Jinmo to kill Li Shun, the father of a mentally ill young man (Li Qing), to create trouble for the government demolition of Mang Village.

---

<sup>1</sup> Round characters are lifelike figures with complex, multifaceted personalities with depth and dimension, often undergoing personal development over a story's course. Flat characters have little complexity and depth of personality ([bit.ly/3RZQTRe](https://bit.ly/3RZQTRe), accessed 25 April 2023).

Having been raised in impoverished circumstances, Gao Qiqiang has spent his entire life captive of desire for money and power. When facing social injustice, Gao Qiqiang makes evil rather than virtuous choices. The gap between Gao Qiqiang and An Xin widens, transforming them from friends to enemies.

With a kind and righteous personality, An Xin is a flat character. Over two decades, a witness, Gao, becomes a criminal underworld leader as they become adversaries. The morality and justice An champions starkly contrast Gao's ongoing degeneration.

An's love for country and people was nurtured by his family. His father was a police officer and died in the line of duty when An was a child. His adoptive father (An Changlin) is also a dedicated and diligent police officer. In his two-decade battle with Gao Qiqiang, An Xin's loyalty to justice makes him never relinquish his insistence on justice. "An Xin" homophonically refers to 'safe and sound' in Chinese and is a message that justice will be served as long as An Xin is around. He is an idealist.

Various characters epitomize the complexity of human nature, suggesting the insatiable lust for power and money, love for family, and insistence on justice. Minor characters such as Chen Shuting and Chen Jinmo are also depicted as complex and multi-faceted. These criminals demonstrate love and trust for their beloved families and friends. Their contradictory complex traits add to their charm. For instance, vicious Chen Shuting is involved in illicit gambling and is instrumental in Gao Qiqiang's success through her collusion with Uncle Tai. Nevertheless, she embodies a mother's love for her son. Chen Jinmo, a ruthless killer who kills whomever Gao Qiqiang orders, loves his daughter (Huang Yao) in ways that resonate with viewers and readers.

The narrator comments on several characters through the use of the third-person omniscient perspective. Several minor characters are represented, and their temptations and difficulties epitomize social issues reflecting injustices and ordinary people's hardships. For instance, Li Qing and his father (Li Shun) are both sacrificed in the conflict between Li Youtian and Gao Qiqiang. Li

Shun is killed in an accident caused by Chen Jinmo, who is dispatched by Gao Qiqiang to sabotage the government's plan to demolish Mang Village. The unfortunate psychopath, Li Qing, depends on his father for financial support and takes medicine every day. After Li Shun's death, Li Youtian incites Li Qing to kidnap Gao Qiqiang's stepson to exact revenge on his father, causing turmoil for Gao Qiqiang.

Gao Qisheng represents educated young people instilled with the notion that their destinies can be altered by strenuous decades-long education and also narrow-minded, bossy, moody, sensitive, and brutal young men. Tempted by money and power, Gao loses control, commits crimes, and is eventually killed by his brother. A graduate with a promising future, Gao's sensitivity and low self-esteem, stemming from his hard life experiences, contribute to his inability to deal with Cao Bin and Li Hongwei ridiculing his poverty, which is why he beats his classmate (Cao Bin) and Li Hongwei. Education does not provide a bright future nor quell the thirst for power, money, and recognition.

In 2023, the thirty-nine-episode TV series of the same name broadcast as *Kuang Biao* had cast members including Zhang Songwen and Zhang Yi. The story begins with a flashback and is supplemented with an aside. The TV series shares a plot similar to the novel except for deleting the details that Xu Jiang is the mastermind of organ trafficking and substituting pig trotter noodles for the novel's beef noodles. Brotherhood, love, family, crime, revenge, power, and desire are interwoven in a complex several-character web. Humor, symbolism, and detailed descriptions of the minor characters add to the TV series' appeal.

Since *Kuang Biao*'s broadcast, numerous discussions and articles have been published on CNKI (Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure). As Huang notes, "From an obscure fishmonger to a triad boss, Gao Qiqiang's changes reflect the unquenchable desire of human nature when faced with the temptation of power" (2023:56, my translation).

Zheng comments, "Instead of purposefully erasing characters' variances within the same type, *Kuang Biao* uses

them to highlight the incompatibility of the mob's relationships and create tension" (2023: 51, my translation).

*The Changchun Daily* (2023) observes:

The TV series portrays a realistic creation embodying the theme while also hitting the pain of reality and mapping the changes of the times with each character's unique growth experiences. It also reflects on social reality by delving deeper into the reasons behind the formation of evil forces and their protective umbrellas (my translation).

*The People's Liberation Army Newspaper* (2023) comments, "From cell phones and television to the demolition of Mang Village, *Kuang Biao* is a story with a sense of the times and realistic significance for its reflection on social changes in different periods" (my translation).

Brotherhood is a major selling point of the TV series, and love between family members contributes to the complexity of Gao Qiqiang's character. As Mario notes, "Brotherhood is a conventional relationship, but it has the same force and meaning as one of blood" (2001:135). A sense of responsibility is the biggest advantage of brotherhood. Most characters in the novel lack functional families, and an answer for yearning for love and family lies in brotherhood. Social injustice results in violence to protect their lives and advance their social position. Gao Qiqiang and the Tang brothers are from lower social classes and lost their parents. After Gao Qiqiang becomes the chairman of the Jiangong Group, his appreciation of Tang Xiaohu's competence leads to Tang Xiaohu becoming his accomplice. Tang Xiaolong's trust in Gao Qiqiang is the motivation for making money through loan sharking and illegal gambling after Tang Xiaolong's release from prison.

Detailed descriptions of minor characters are illustrated in the TV series. For example, Li Qing, the victim of his father's death, suffers from mental illness. The TV series adds a plot involving An Xin and Lu Han dropping by to investigate the cause of Li Shun's death, ostensibly to have lunch with him. The

novel's meticulously detailed descriptions of Li Qing are omitted, but his characterization in the TV series associates Li Qing with everyday life, instilling vivid, lifelike qualities and emphasizing the tight bond with his father, Li Shun.

Humor in the series incorporates death, violence, crimes, and love, offering the audience a thrilling binge-watching experience with comic relief. One amusing scene involves Gao Qiqiang and Xu Jiang beating each other's heads with liquor bottles in the Baijinhuan Hotel, both holding their heads and crying out in pain. Given both are vicious criminals, their behavior enhances the authenticity of their reactions. Moreover, at his son's funeral, Xu Jiang, a ruthless organ trafficking criminal, prepares a table full of Wahaha (a popular drink among kids) as offerings in stark contrast to his cruelty.

Food in the TV series, such as noodles with pig trotters and Cantonese rice noodle rolls, further adds to the characters' credible qualities. During the TV series' filming, Zhang Songwen who plays Gao Qiqiang, suggests that pig's trotter noodles, a Guangzhou specialty, is more realistic than beef noodles, a Gansu Province specialty, and should be used in the TV series instead of the novel's beef noodles.

Symbolism in the TV series includes the noodles with pig trotters, reflecting the complexity of Gao Qiqiang's attributes. Such food was not affordable for the Gao brothers in their childhood. Gao Qiqiang saves money to buy it for his younger siblings on birthdays, suggesting his love for them. Later, when An Xin suspects that Gao Qiqiang is involved in Xu Lei's death, Gao Qiqiang invites An Xin to eat pig's trotter noodles and tells An Xin the story of how he couldn't afford such food in his childhood, suggesting to An that he is honest and does not commit crimes.

In addition to rice noodle rolls and noodles with trotters, *Sunzi bingfa* 'The Art of War'<sup>1</sup> makes a few cameos in the TV

---

<sup>1</sup> *Sunzi bingfa* 'The Art of War' is a fifth-century BCE military treatise written by the Chinese strategist, Sun Wu. Covering all aspects of warfare, it seeks to advise commanders on how to prepare, mobilize,

series. After the fishmonger, Gao Qiqiang, is released from prison, An Xin recommends Gao read *The Art of War* to broaden his horizons. Gao subsequently combines desire and ambition with military tactics, using Sunzi's work as a guide as he works his way up the social ladder. For example, one of the tactics in *Sunzi bingfa* is "When you surround an army, leave an outlet free. Do not press a desperate foe too hard" (Giles 2022:373). Gao uses this strategy to cope with the Tang brothers, who bullied Gao when he was a fishmonger. Gao Qiqiang, however, employs them to work for him after he becomes a triad boss and does not take revenge.

Since its broadcast, *The Knockout* has been a favorite of domestic viewers and viewers abroad due to its "higher production value and the nuanced plot focusing on the decades-long rivalry between a clean cop and crime boss."<sup>1</sup> *Global Times* comments:

The *Knockout* shows the occasional change of fate and the complexity of human nature with a realistic and flowing story. It is worth noting that Gao Qiqiang is a character that is no longer a stereotypical role seen in other similar dramas thanks to the actor's adept acting (<https://bit.ly/41LnyOe>, accessed 5 May 2023).

Meanwhile, *Foreign Policy* comments: "*The Knockout* is filled with police chases, nuanced characters, excellent acting, and thrilling suspense. Additionally, it is full of sights of scenes of everyday life and delicately presented corruption."<sup>2</sup>

*Kuang Biao* breaks the conventional perception of crime series featuring criminals as one-dimensional bad guys. Compared to the TV series, readers are less enthusiastic. Many Douban users were interested in the novel after watching the TV series but found the plot disorganized and confusing because of

---

attack, defend, and treat the vanquished ([bit.ly/3H1Unw9](https://bit.ly/3H1Unw9), accessed 26 April 2023, my translation).

<sup>1</sup> <http://bit.ly/48mXPxS>, accessed 5 May 2023.

<sup>2</sup> <https://bit.ly/48gmof2>, accessed 5 May 2023.

a lack of convincing connections between incidents. The characters' charm and attributes are more impressive than a lack of vividness in depictions of their inner worlds. Characters lack authenticity because each chapter only introduces their criminal activities. Another criticism is that the unimpressive and wooden dialogue makes the reading experience devoid of aesthetic enjoyment.

Readers enjoy the story for its realism and gripping plot. In contrast to many criminal novels, which concentrate on the protagonist's personality and are grounded in real cases, *Kuang Biao* exposes social issues by highlighting underprivileged people's hardships, e.g., the mentally ill Li Qing. Additionally, *Kuang Biao* is significant in reflecting the national crackdown on organized gang crime by introducing various crimes.

## REFERENCES

- Bi Xinyue 毕馨月. 2023. Kuangbiao shi ruhe dazao kainian baokuan de 《狂飙》是如何打造开年爆款的 [How *The Knockout* became a Hit during the Spring Festival]. *Changchun ribao* 长春日报 [Changchun Daily]. <https://bit.ly/3voJaJI>, accessed 8 May 2023.
- Huang Boyang 黄博阳. 2023. Shidai jingxiang, luoji tujing yu renxing zhezhou - Ping dianshiju kuangbiao 时代镜像、逻辑图景与人性褶皱- 评电视剧《狂飙》 [Reflections of the Times, Logic of Narrative, and Complex Human Nature - Commenting on the TV Series *The Knockout*]. *Dangdai dianshi* 当代电视 [Contemporary TV] 419(03):53-57.
- Liverani, Mario. 2001. *International Relations in the Ancient Near East, 1600-11BC*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sun Zi 孙子 (Lionel Giles, translator). 2022. *Sunzi bingfa (yingwenban)* 孙子兵法 (英文版) [The Art of War]. Beijing 北京: Bei jing jiu zhi tian da wen hua chuan mei you xian gong si 北京九志天达文化传媒有限公司 [Empyrean Media Group LLC.].

- Xu Yuanchong 许渊冲. 2020. *Xuyuanchong yingyi maozedong shici: hanying duizhao* 许渊冲英译毛泽东诗词：汉英对照 [Poetica: Works of Chairman Mao Zedong]. Beijing 北京: Zhongyi chubanshe 中译出版社 [China Translation & Publishing House].
- Yu Wan 俞菀, Ma Jian 马剑, and Wu Shuaishuai 吴帅帅. 2023. Kuangbiao he yi kuang biao 《狂飙》何以“狂飙” [Why *The Knockout* is "a Knockout Success." ] *Xinhua meiri dianxun* 新华每日电讯 [Xinhua Daily Telegraph]. <https://bit.ly/3GHNOyy>, accessed 9 May 2023.
- Zhang Yi 张熠. 2023. Kai nian di yi ju kuang biao ji jiang shou guan, wei he jiao hao you jiao zuo 开年第一剧《狂飙》即将收官, 为何叫好又叫座 [The Knockout, the First Drama of the Chinese New Year, is About to End - Why it is Good and Popular]. *Jiefang ribao* 解放日报 [Jiefang Daily]. [bit.ly/4aIWnqH](https://bit.ly/4aIWnqH), accessed 9 May 2023.
- Zheng Yapeng 郑亚鹏. 2023. Dianshiju kuangbiao zhong duochong yuansu de ronghe yu yanjin 电视剧《狂飙》中多重元素的融合与演进 [Integration and Evolution of Multiple Elements in the TV Series *The Knockout*]. *Dangdai dianshi* 当代电视 [Contemporary TV] 419(03):49-52.
- Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫. 2019. *Mao zedong shici xinshang* 毛泽东诗词欣赏 [Appreciation of Mao Zedong's Poetry]. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局 [Zhonghua Book Company].
- Zhu Junyi and Xu Jizhou 朱俊懿 & 徐纪周. 2023. *Kuang biao* 狂飙 [The Knockout]. Qingdao 青岛: Qingdao chubanshe 青岛出版社 [Qingdao Publishing House].

## CHINESE TERMS

An Changlin 安长林

An Liu 暗流

An Xin 安欣

Bai Jiangbo 白江波



Bai Jinhan 白金瀚

Cao Bin 曹斌

Cao Chuang 曹闯

Chen Jinmo 陈金默

Chen Shuting 陈书婷

*Chunjiangyingxiong zhi xiucai yushang bing*

春江英雄之秀才遇上兵

*Dielianhua* Cong Tingzhou Xiang Changsha

蝶恋花：从汀州向长沙

Douban 豆瓣

Fang Mu 方木

Feng Lang 风浪

Gansu 甘肃

Gao Qilan 高启兰

Gao Qiqiang 高启强

Gao Qisheng 高启盛

Gao Ye 高叶

Gong Kaijiang 龚开疆

Guangzhou 广州

Huang Yao 黄瑶

Jiangong 建工 Group

Jinghai 京海

*Kuang Biao* 狂飙

Li Hongwei 李宏伟

Li Qing 李青

Li Shun 李顺

Li Xiang 李响

Li Youtian 李有田

Lu Han 陆寒

Mangcun 莽村

Mao Zedong 毛泽东

Meng Yu 孟钰

Mengyuan Bar, Mengyuan Jiuba 梦缘酒吧

Ping Jing 平静

Qingdao 青岛

Qingdao Chubanshe 青岛出版社

Shaanxi Normal University, Shaanxi Shifan Daxue 陕西师范大学

*Sunzi Bingfa* 孙子兵法

*Ta shi shui* 他是谁

Tang Xiaohu 唐小虎

Tang Xiaolong 唐小龙

Uncle Tai, Tai Shu 泰叔

Wahaha 娃哈哈

Wu Jing 吴晶

Xiaolingtong 小灵通

*Xiaoshi de Shiyiceng* 消失的十一层

*Xinlizui zhi Chengshi zhi Guang* 心理罪之城市之光

Xu Jiang 徐江

Xu Jizhou 徐纪周

Xu Lei 徐雷

Xu Yuanchong 许渊冲

Yang Jian 杨建

Ye Boyu 叶伯钰

*Yongbumomie de Fanhao* 永不磨灭的番号

Zhang Biao 张彪

Zhang Songwen 张颂文

Zhang Yi 张译

Zhao Lidong 赵立冬

Zhong Asi 钟阿四

Zhu Junyi 朱俊懿